CHINA REPORT

Volume No. 152 January 2026

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Right to Repair: Electric vehicles hit a maintenace roadblock

INTERNATIONAL

China-Japan Relations: Tokyo roils post-World War II order

CAUGHT IN THE NET

Saving youth from the depths of online addiction

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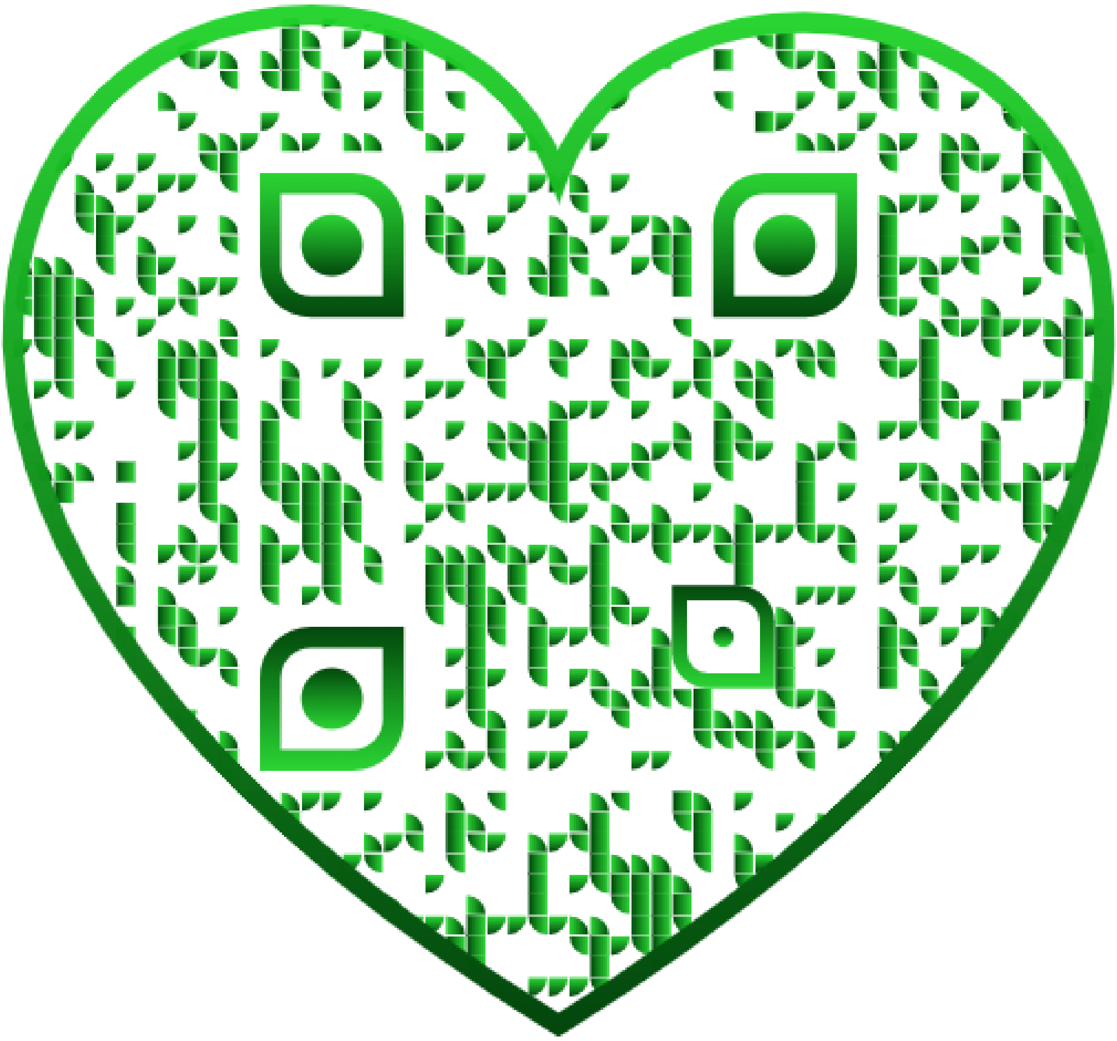

UNWTO
World Tourism Organization

Around the world tourism grows every single year. Tourism creates job opportunities, empowers communities and improves livelihoods.

Tourism is part of the economic value chain, from infrastructure and communication to food production and transport.

Tourism goes far beyond tourism alone! Delivering on its huge potential is the task of the **World Tourism Organization (UNWTO),** the UN's special agency to promote tourism's many benefits on societies and the economy.

unwto.org

Johannesburg G20 Summit highlights breakthroughs, deep challenges in global governance

The G20 Summit in Johannesburg, South Africa, concluded on November 23 and adopted a leaders' declaration on an "overwhelming consensus" among participating members. The summit also demonstrated structural changes in global governance.

> Against the backdrop of multiple transnational challenges, no country can tackle any of them alone, and the international community must therefore overcome prejudices and strengthen cooperation

The 2025 summit adopted a more pragmatic approach, focusing on areas with more chance of cooperation, from trade and investment, to finance and industrialisation, and innovation and sustainable development, instead of divisive issues such as multilateralism, regional conflicts and political security.

As the first G20 summit held in Africa, more attention was paid to African issues. The declaration includes a dedicated chapter on partnerships with Africa, calling for enhanced support for the continent's development.

The role of the Global South was also more prominent. Following the G20 summits hosted by Indonesia in 2022, India in 2023 and Brazil in 2024, the 2025 meeting marked the fourth consecutive summit held in a developing country, reflecting the growing willingness and influence of the Global South to shape global governance.

Beginning early this year, the US stepped up criticism of South Africa over various issues. Senior US officials skipped major G20 ministerial meetings, including the foreign ministers' and finance ministers' gatherings.

On November 8, the US announced that it would not attend the summit and pressed the host country not to issue any leaders' declaration in the US's absence. This marked the first time that a major power has opted for a complete boycott and zero participation. The G20 is facing an unprecedented risk of fragmentation.

Behind this episode lies a deeper truth: Today's world is grappling with multiple, overlapping tensions. East-West strategic competition, North-South development gaps and internal social divides, which make reaching a global consensus much more difficult.

Yet the greater the global fragmentation, the more indispensable effective global governance becomes. Against the backdrop of multiple transnational challenges, no country can tackle any of them alone, and the international community must therefore overcome prejudices and strengthen cooperation.

To move forward, the G20 should focus on three priorities. First, countries must seek common ground while managing differences. Only by enhancing mutual trust and returning to the path of dialogue can the political foundation of global governance be stabilised.

Second, existing multilateral mechanisms should be strengthened rather than weakened. The US absence did not halt the summit, nor did it prevent members from achieving results. This demonstrates the relative autonomy of global governance mechanisms, indicating that defending multilateralism and openness remain shared interests of participating countries.

Third, the rise of the Global South should be recognised as a positive force in international affairs. As Western powers increasingly turn inward, developing nations have more space and the responsibility to shape global governance. And now the Global South has proved it possesses both the capability and the vision to play a greater role.

The Johannesburg summit ultimately underscores a clear message: despite divergences, cooperation remains the only viable path for addressing global challenges.

By consolidating consensus, advancing reform and upholding multilateralism, the international community can steer global governance towards greater stability, fairness and effectiveness at a pivotal time.★

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ChinaReport explores how gaming and internet addictions have an increasing hold on young Chinese, and the dangerous extremes some go to digital detox

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㊵ Pet blood banks are bleeding owners dry, while exploiting stray animals and lax welfare regulations

㊸ Graduates are flocking back to study at vocational schools as they try to upskill in a cutthroat jobs market

㊿ Veteran Mandopop singer Chang Chen-yue reflects on his career reinvention for a new generation of fans

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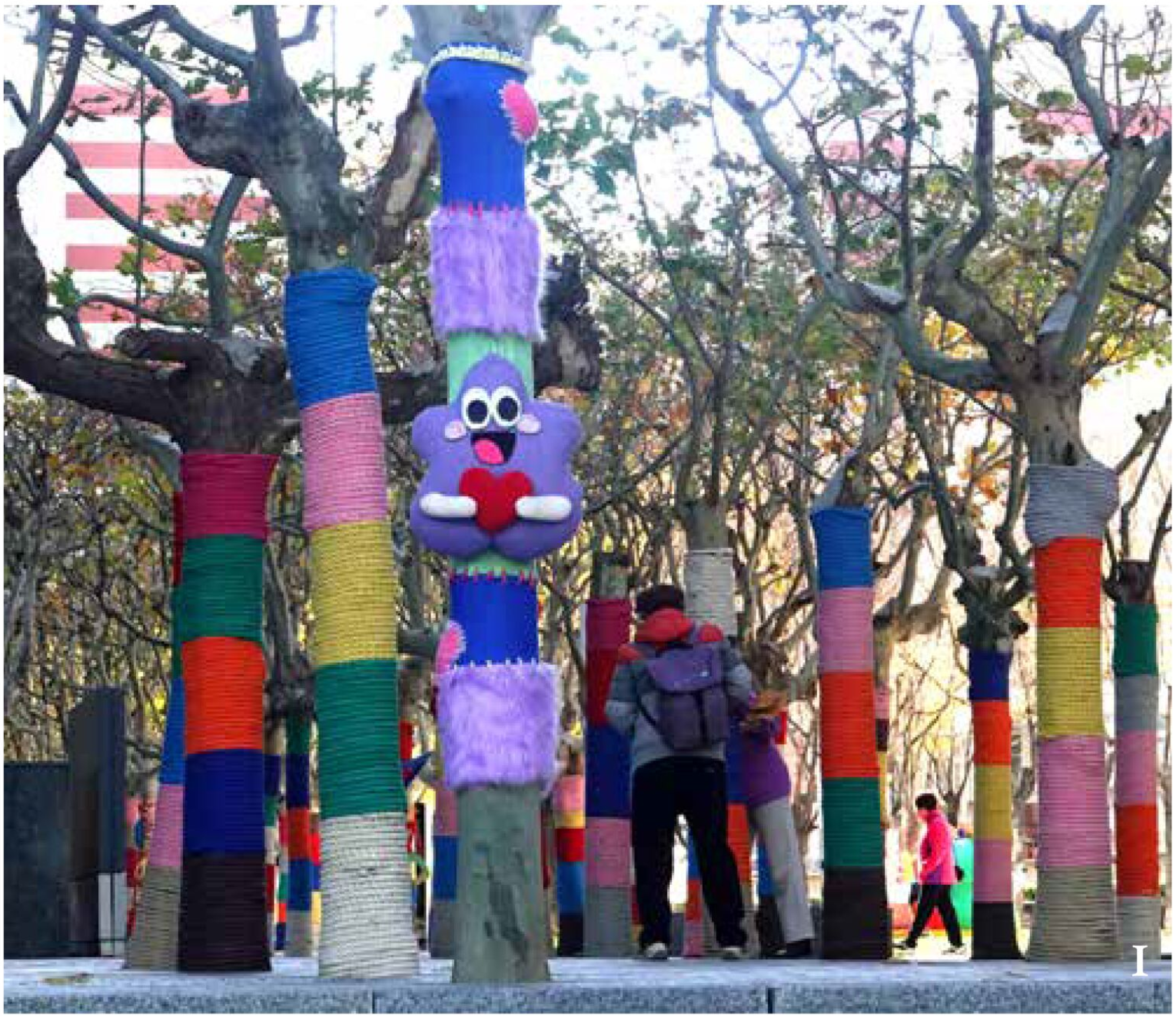

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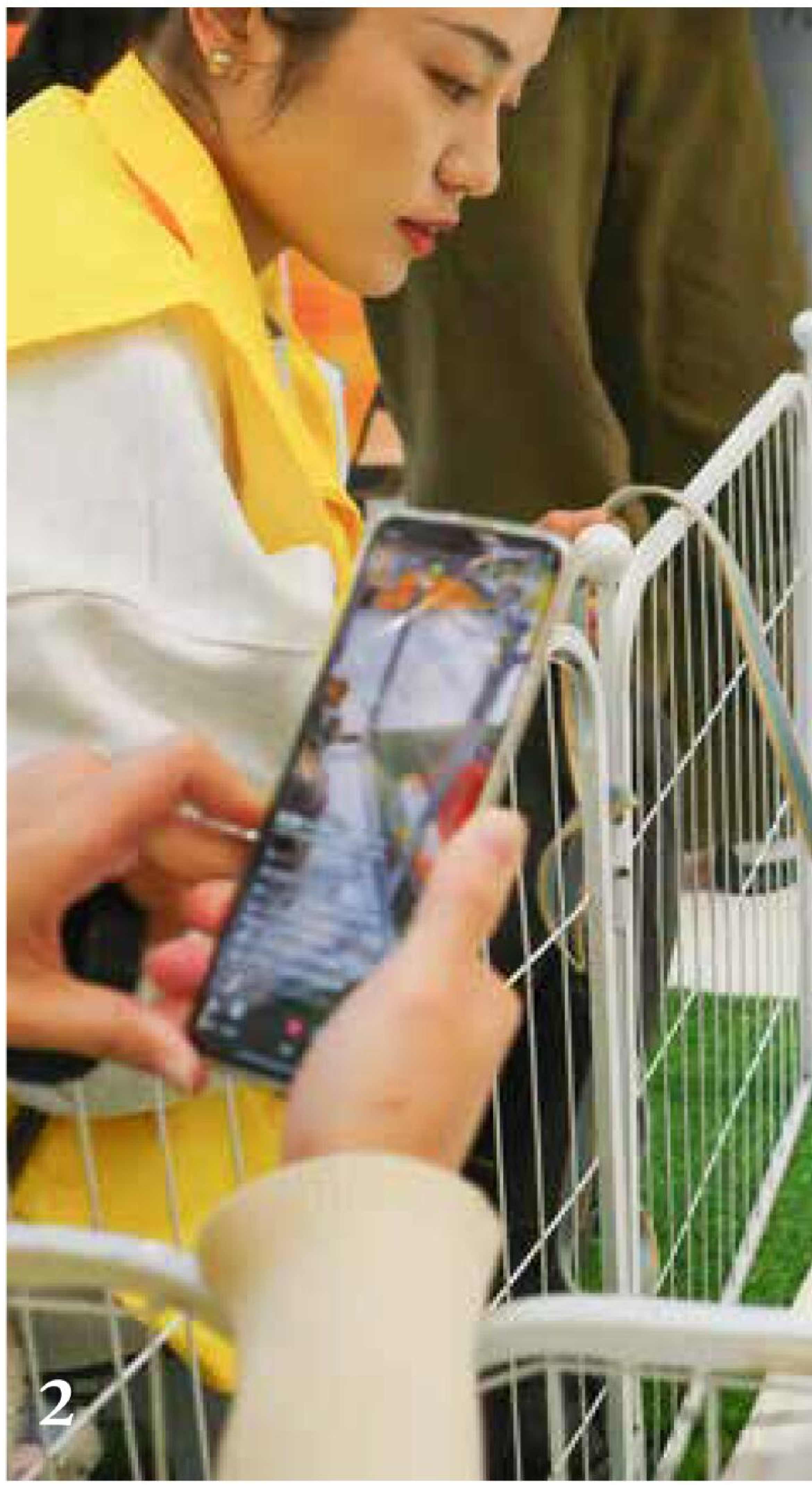

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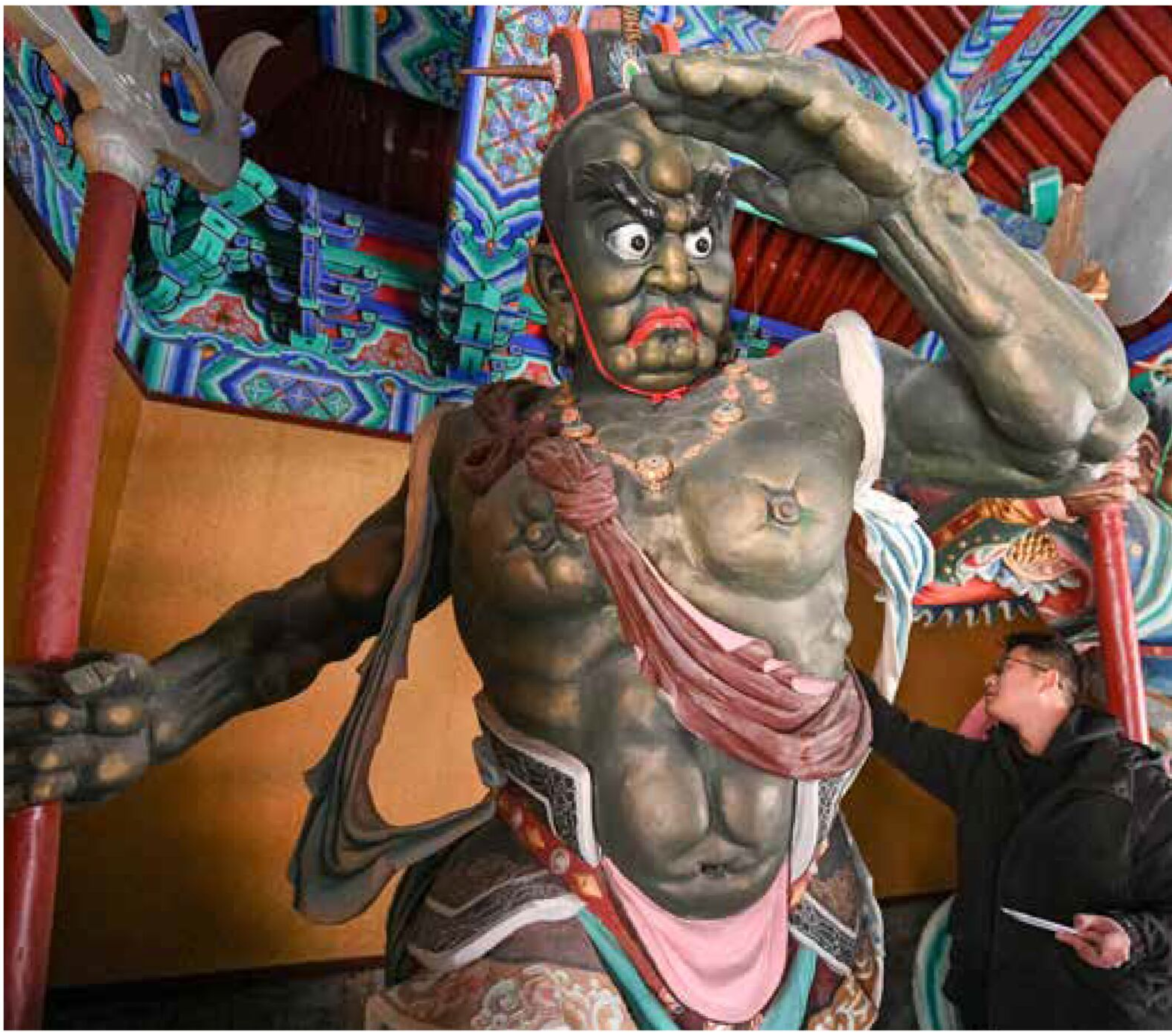
1.People take photos of sycamore trees swathed in colourful, cute sweaters, Haidian District, Beijing, November 20, 2025 (Photo by VCG)

2. A rescue dog interacts with visitors at a dog adoption event at a shopping mall in Beijing, December 6, 2025 (Photo by VCG)

3. A tourist stands on the Buddha's Hand Sculpture in Yangxin County, Hubei Province, with a panoramic view of Xiandao Lake in the background, December 8, 2025 (Photo by VCG)

4. An artisan restores the Vajra Guardian statue at Tianhou Temple in Tianjin, December 10, 2025 (Photo by IC)

5. Visitors interact with a light art installation based on Vincent Van Gogh's *Starry Night* projected in the Chongqing Liberation Monument shopping area, Chongqing, December 5, 2025 (Photo by IC)



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1. Visitors enjoy a beautiful autumnal scene at Dongtai Huanghai National Forest Park, Yancheng, Jiangsu Province, December 7, 2025 (Photo by VCG)

2. Flamingos play on Yuncheng Salt Lake, Shanxi Province, November 28, 2025 (Photo by VCG)

3. Ice sculptures of characters from *Zootopia* are displayed at Shanghai Disneyland, Shanghai, December 5, 2025 (Photo by VCG)

4. Workers construct "Mr. Snowman," a 23.8-metre-tall snow sculpture, for the 38th Sun Island International Snow Sculpture Art Expo, Harbin, Helongjiang Province, December 7, 2025 (Photo by VCG)

Lax Imports Behind Popularity of Cosmetic Treatments in South Korea

China Newsweek December 1, 2025

Due to their fashionable and low-price products and services, cosmetology clinical services in South Korea saw a 132.4 percent year-on-year surge in Chinese customers in 2024, totalling 261,000 visits. However, despite popular treatments such as skin filler hyaluronic acid, Botox and cutting-edge collagen regeneration technology by radiofrequency and laser, complaints over short-lived effects persist. Lured by the world's newest cosmetology products like Rejuran Hydroderm Booster and Ultherapy, many Chinese frequent South Korean cosmetology clinics, ignoring their extreme market tactics and uncertain aftercare. Unlike China's scrupulous market authorisation procedures, South Korea is much more lax in allowing imports of cosmetology products. Experts point out that clinical trials often obscure differences between old and new products, but the safety of their procedures should be the top concern for customers.

Agricultural Speciality Industry Needs Support

China Collective Economy December 5, 2025

As a crucial booster to China's agricultural modernisation and integrated urban-rural development, rural speciality products, local to their regions, have achieved remarkable progresses in terms of scale, diversity and marketing. However, still in their nascent stages, speciality agricultural industries face challenges in marketing, financing and talent nurturing. The increasing access of foreign speciality products into the Chinese market has intensified competition and triggered price wars. Insufficient investment and product lines have deterred the industry's innovation and productive capacity. Poor education provision has caused population outflow and brain drain, while policies designed to boost local industries have struggled to take effect, largely due to bureaucratic red tape. To remove the obstacles, experts suggest the industry expand markets through e-commerce channels, such as livestream sales, introduce targeted subsidies and capital, launch advanced industrial facilities and create a better environment for well-trained workers and high-end talents.

China-made EV Charging Piles Proliferate Abroad

Auto Review November 1, 2025

汽车纵横
AUTO REVIEW

For the world's nearly 58 million electric vehicles (EVs) in 2024, the number of public EV charging piles doubled from 2022 to over five million by the end of 2024, of which 65 percent were made in China. To further tap the potential caused by the gap between EV stock and public chargers, Chinese enterprises are responding to the demands of high-power fast charging in developed countries and basic infrastructure in emerging markets. Despite the sluggish global economy, setbacks to globalisation and anti low-carbon sentiment in some countries, Chinese enterprises have adapted to different markets' standards. Apart from strong energy storage capacity, they build operating platforms to suit local conditions. Experts suggest that charger suppliers should update their market and legal research, integrate supply chains and improve after-service operations.

Central Kitchens, Concept Bistros Redefine Chinese Cuisine

Yi Magazine
November 12, 2025

YiMagazine

Driven by rising costs of rent, labour and raw materials, China's catering industry has transformed from on-site cooking to outsourced central kitchens. These kitchens provide semi-prepared foods to chain restaurants or public cafeterias where the dishes are finished. Many kitchens, whether affiliated to chain restaurants or operated independently, are abandoning additives and packing food for long life through measures such as nitrogen flushing, which removes oxygen to prevent food decay. But due to the bland taste of prepared food, some catering professionals are trying to change the game by opening concept bistros featuring spicy and flavoursome dishes from Sichuan, Yunnan and Guizhou provinces. By creating fusion dishes with Western foods, these stylish eateries appeal to the dining habits of young consumers. Experts believe the changes in the catering industry mirror changes in people's tastes.

Mega-Merger Among Securities Firms Targets Stronger Competitiveness

Weekly on Stocks
November 29, 2025

The trading halts due to a corporate restructuring announced by China International Capital Corp (CICC), Dongxing Securities and Cida Securities on November 19, 2025 confirmed their mega-merger, with total value estimated at more than 1 trillion yuan (US$142b). The merger will reshape China's securities market by enabling CICC, the cross-border financial institution, to penetrate the country's smaller cities while sharing resources with the other two firms. With a programme of strategic high-quality development launched in the national finance sector since 2023, a new wave of acquisitions has formed to strengthen competitiveness. China's financial regulators have encouraged banks and insurance companies to buy and hold securities equities. Experts believe that fintech, such as AI advisers, quantitative trading and block-chain settlements, will be increasingly important to domestic financial conglomerates.

"AI has disrupted the traditional linear chain of basic research to technology development to market adoption. These stages now overlap and iterate quickly. This means universities must rethink their role in the innovation ecosystem. They can no longer be mere producers of knowledge, but should serve as hubs within the ecosystem, driving the integration of science and technology."

Jin Li, president of Fudan University in Shanghai, at the 2025 World University Presidents Forum held in Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province on November 8, 2025

"The power of AI lies in how it's applied, not merely in its invention. Companies that invent AI are merely IT companies, while nations that apply AI effectively will become stronger."

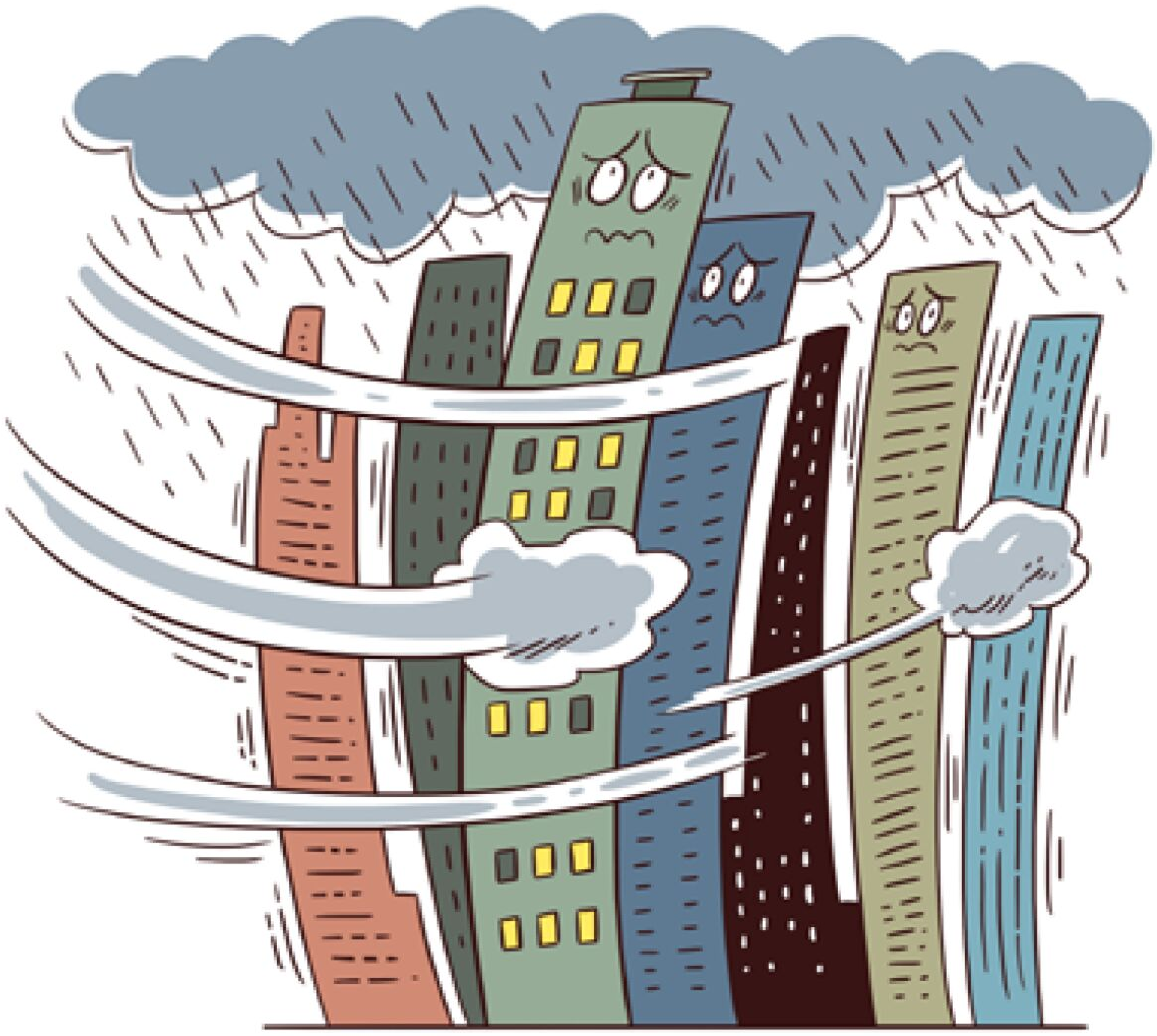
Ren Zhengfei, founder of Huawei, at a symposium in Shanghai with the chairman, coaches and winners of the International Collegiate Programming Contest held on November 14, 2025

"As AI seems capable of everything, many writers are asking themselves: 'Do we still matter? Is there still space for us?' The answer is yes. But, today, the beauty and storytelling found in pure text struggle to find a place in a market dominated by flashy, noisy audio-visual content. Purely written works have lost readers willing to listen quietly. Time keeps moving ahead. We once had our glory, and we do not complain."

Xi Juan, a well-known romance novelist from Taiwan, writing on her blog on November 19, 2025 as she announced her retirement from writing

"As I started youth training and coached the Suzhou team, I've seen more and more children playing football, especially those born after 2008. There is a much better chance of finding good players if there are more candidates."

Li Weifeng, former player in China's national men's football team, in an interview with news portal The Paper



"The urban sprawl of the past 30 years displays a reckless pursuit of super-tall buildings and excessive excavation of underground space, which has created deep-rooted structural problems that hinder cities' abilities to fight climate change."

Li Xiaojiang, former director of the China Academy of Urban Planning & Design, in an interview with financial portal Caixin in late November 2025

"Innovations in fields like health, longevity and anti-ageing require huge investment. In the early stages, rich people tend to benefit first, living longer and healthier lives. The public won't benefit the same until the technologies mature and costs fall."

Peng Xizhe, director of the Fudan Institute of Ageing in Shanghai, talking at a China International Import Expo sub-forum on the silver economy in Shanghai on November 6, 2025

"In the next five years, BRICS cooperation for the Global South will enter a golden phase of development. After these five years, when we talk about the world's leading platforms, the BRICS mechanism may be more influential than today's G7. Given this, the next five years will be a golden window for the Global South to advance development and cooperation."

Wu Xinbo, director of the Institute of International Studies, Fudan University, at the 2025 Analyst Conference held in Shanghai on November 28, 2025

"Children under 6 years old cannot clearly distinguish reality from fiction. Allowing them to perform too early can hinder their healthy psychological development."

Zhang Jing, a professor at the Communication University of China in Beijing, explaining why she opposes very young children acting in ultra-short dramas, in an interview with The Paper in December 2025

French President Macron Visits China, Reinforcing Message of Cooperation

French President Emmanuel Macron paid a state visit to China from December 3 to 5, 2025 on the invitation of Chinese President Xi Jinping, further reinforcing ties between China and France.

This was Macron's fourth visit to China during his presidency, and comes after Xi made a State visit to France in May 2024.

During their talks in Beijing, Xi, according to China's foreign ministry, underscored that no matter how the external environment may evolve, China and France should always demonstrate the strategic vision and independence of a major country, offer each other understanding and support on issues concerning core interests and major concerns, and safeguard the political foundation of China-France relations. He added that China and France should strengthen cooperation in traditional areas such as aviation, aerospace and nuclear energy, and unlock the cooperation potential in the green economy, digital economy, biomedicine, AI, new energy and other fields.

"China is ready to import more quality products from France, and welcomes more French companies to operate in China. China also hopes France will provide a level playing field and stable expectations for Chinese enterprises... The two countries should deepen exchanges and cooperation in culture, education, science and technology, as well as at subnational levels, and write more exciting chapters of people-to-people and cultural exchanges," Xi told Macron.

Macron responded that he fully agrees with Xi's views on reforming and improving global governance and promoting a more balanced global economy. He noted that France firmly upholds the one-China principle and is willing to continue deepening the France-China comprehensive strategic partnership. He said that France is ready to work with China to promote mutual investment, strengthen cooperation in such areas as economy, trade and renewable energy, and deepen friendly cultural exchanges.

Macron expressed France's commitment to promoting the sound and steady development of Europe-China relations, saying that France believes Europe and China should uphold dialogue and cooperation, and that Europe should achieve strategic autonomy.

At a later joint press conference, Xi noted that during the 15th Five-Year Plan (2026-2030), China will drive high-quality development through deepening reforms comprehensively, further expand domestic demand and open up more sectors, and meanwhile, guide the rational and orderly overseas distribution of industrial and supply chains.

"These will create even broader space for practical cooperation between China and France and for the development of bilateral relations," Xi said.

Before flying home, Macron travelled to Chengdu, capital of Southwest China's Sichuan Province, delivering a speech at Sichuan University that emphasised the importance of cooperation and mutual understanding in tackling contemporary challenges. Xi and Macron also met at Dujiangyan Irrigation System, built over 2,000 years ago and still functioning today. Macron played a friendly table tennis match with Chinese and French athletes participating in the 2025 ITTF Mixed Team World Cup held in Chengdu.

During Macron's three-day trip, the two heads of state released joint statements on enhancing global governance, cooperation on addressing global climate and environmental challenges, continued cooperation on the peaceful use of nuclear energy, exchanges and cooperation on agriculture and food, as well as the situation in Ukraine and Palestine, with multiple cooperation documents signed, covering nuclear energy, agri-food, education and the environment, among others.

China Eastern Launches World's Longest Flight to Argentina

After a journey of nearly 26 hours, passengers aboard a China Eastern Airlines flight from Shanghai arrived in Buenos Aires, Argentina close at 4:45 pm on December 4, 2025. Not only is it the first direct commercial flight between China and Argentina, it is currently the longest commercially operated passenger air route. The flight stops at Auckland, New Zealand, for refuelling, crew rotation and to allow passengers a break.

The new southern flight path via New Zealand is around 20,000 kilometres long. Operated by a Boeing-777 300ER, the inaugural flight carried 282 passengers. Celebrations were held in Shanghai and Buenos Aires, as well as in Auckland. "This new route fills the gap in direct flights between Shanghai and major South American cities," China Eastern Airlines said in a statement. The new route is expected to boost trade and tourism, and help the increasing East Asian diaspora who live in South America.

Twice-weekly outbound flights from Shanghai will operate on Mondays and Thursdays, and the return from Buenos Aires operates on Tuesdays and Fridays. The return leg takes an additional four hours.

Three Chinese Cities Added to UNESCO's Learning Network

UNESCO announced on December 4, 2025 that it has added 72 cities from 46 countries and regions to the Global Network of Learning Cities (GNLC), including three from China – Ningbo, Zhejiang Province, Shenyang, Liaoning Province and Tianjin Municipality.

Launched in 2013, the GNLC values cities that have expanded study from schools to workplaces, libraries, families and public places. They provide literacy education and skills training to all age groups to help them adapt to the changing labour market and the AI era.

According to UNESCO, Ningbo was honoured for working hard to promote lifelong learning, Tianjin for supporting elderly education, community education and vocational education, as well as fostering industry-education integration, and Shenyang for expanding equitable access to preschool education, compulsory education and vocational education.

China now has 15 cities listed in the GNLC.

Africa's First G20 Summit Held in Johannesburg

The 20th Group of 20 (G20) Summit opened in Johannesburg, South Africa on November 22, 2025, where a declaration for strengthening multilateralism was adopted.

According to the Xinhua News Agency, the G20 122-point declaration, titled "G20 South Africa Summit: Leaders' Declaration," underscores the need to address global challenges, including climate change and growing economic inequality and instability, through multilateral cooperation. It calls for stronger support for developing countries to advance inclusive growth and sustainable development.

Chinese Premier Li Qiang delivered a speech at the first session where he emphasised the importance of international solidarity and urged the G20 to face global problems squarely, explore solutions and help bring all parties back to the track of solidarity and cooperation.

This is the first time the G20 summit has been held in Africa, and is regarded as a pivotal moment for Africa as it seeks to elevate its role in global governance and advance development priorities shared by the Global South, even though the US chose to boycott the multilateral summit.

Hong Kong Apartment Complex Fire Kills 160 People

At least 160 people have been confirmed dead due to a tragic fire that spread among tower blocks in Hong Kong's Tai Po district on November 26, 2025, according to an updated tally on December 9.

The blaze started in a tower block at Wang Fuk Court residential complex at 2:51 pm. The complex was undergoing renovation and surrounded by bamboo scaffolding and safety netting. The blaze, whipped up by strong winds, spread quickly to seven of the eight 31-storey residential towers. It is thought to have started in the scaffolding netting in the lower floors of a building.

Many residents of Wang Fuk Court, a government-assisted residential project housing senior citizens and families, were trapped inside and unable to evacuate. Built in 1983, Wang Fuk Court had 1,980 households.

Authorities dispatched 2,311 firefighters and first-aid staff with 391 fire trucks and 185 ambulances. While the fire was essentially under control by the next morning, high temperatures inside the towers hampered rescue efforts. Among the casualties was 37-year-old firefighter Ho Wai-ho, and another 12 firefighters were injured.

The investigation's focus is the Prestige Construction & Engineering Company, responsible for the renovation works. Preliminary investigations found the fire spread rapidly due to substandard and non-flame-retardant netting and flammable foam panels covering windows. Police in Hong Kong have arrested 15 suspects connected with the building works, and authorities swiftly announced compensation packages for victims.

New Rules Rolled Out for Food Delivery Services

China has released new rules aimed at standardising the country's huge food delivery sector and pushing its healthy development.

The State Administration for Market Regulation (SAMR) issued the national guideline in early December 2025, which takes aim at some of the poor practices across the sector, including excessive platform fees, unrealistic delivery times, "ghost kitchens" and aggressive sales tactics.

The guideline covers all stakeholders to ensure fairness and transparency, including sellers, platforms, delivery people and how to deal with customer complaints.

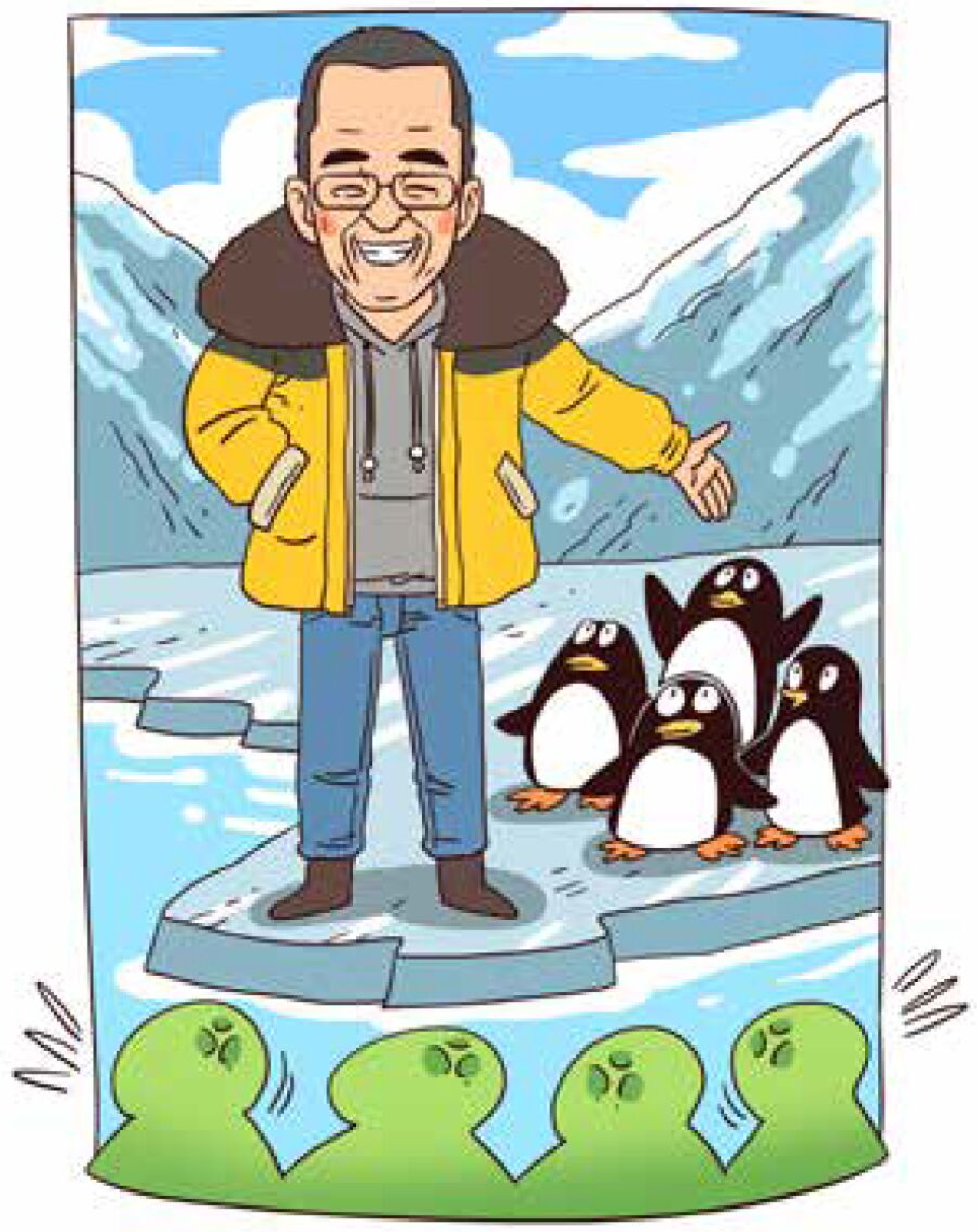
Food vendors must show proof of their business licence, videos of their premises, and verifiable location data to address the issue of below-standard "ghost kitchens."

Platforms must not offer below-cost pricing to undercut rival platforms, they cannot force vendors to participate in promotions, and they cannot pass on the costs of promotional activities to vendors.

A key aim of the rules is to protect the rights of delivery workers. Delivery algorithms must reflect actual conditions, including the current weather, and delivery times must be calculated to reflect a maximum speed of 15 kilometres per hour, and other factors, such as whether a building has lifts. They cannot force delivery workers to extend their working time through offering bonuses.

While not legally binding, major platforms including Meituan, JD and Taobao said they would adopt the new standards, media reported.

Experts said that while the rules are recommendations, they will improve the chaos in the sector by setting clear standards, and solve the long-existing contradictions between sellers, platforms and customers.



New Oriental Staff Push Back After Founder's Polar Expedition Message

Netizen Comments:

- "This isn't an isolated incident at one company. It reflects the widespread frustration of countless workers facing unbearable pressure."
- "Yu Minhong is an idealistic entrepreneur skilled at using passionate rhetoric. But this time, his message came at the worst possible moment. The boss was enjoying a luxury trip while employees were drowning in overtime. His grand words sounded less like encouragement and more like irony."
- "Capitalists feel more sympathy for emperor penguins in Antarctica than for the office workers in their own cubicles."

Source: Zhihu

Media Comments:

***Guangzhou Daily*, a Guangzhou-based newspaper:** "It would be better for Yu Minhong to recognise the growing public resentment towards overtime and rat-race culture and to provide employees with more tangible benefits such as bonuses and holidays. At the same time, netizens should avoid being overly critical. No one is perfect. Yu is a respectable entrepreneur who has made major contributions to the education sector, created countless jobs and inspired numerous students."

Source: Guangzhou Daily website

Shang Linyuan, media critic and columnist: "Yu's incident serves as a reminder for today's employers when communicating with staff. Managers should not only speak of 'grand' visions and company values but must genuinely understand employees' working conditions and offer real care and benefits. Younger workers today prefer honest, equal and down-to-earth communication."

Source: Baidu.com

She Zongming, commentator with the *Chengdu Commercial Daily*: "Modern business leaders must improve their ability to empathise and truly 'see' the needs of their employees."

Source: Chengdu Commercial Daily Website

An education mogul has found himself at the centre of a public backlash after an anniversary letter he sent from Antarctica angered exhausted employees. On November 16, while on holiday in Antarctica, Yu Minhong, founder of Chinese education giant New Oriental, sent an internal memo to all staff marking the company's 32nd anniversary. Instead of inspiring morale, the note triggered frustration among frontline workers already overwhelmed by long hours.

In the letter, Yu wrote, "At this moment, I stand amid the icy, snowy world of Antarctica. Surrounding me are vast whiteness, emerald icebergs and boundless tranquility." He also compared hardworking New Oriental employees to Antarctic penguins who survive harsh conditions by banding together. At the same time, he actively posted his polar adventure on social media. Since November 13, Yu had posted 13 videos documenting his trip, featuring topics such as meals at sea and sunrises over icebergs, seabirds and penguins.

The contrast between Yu's luxurious travels and the reality faced by employees quickly fuelled discontent. On November 17, an article titled "A Reply to Yu Minhong's Letter" appeared on lifestyle app RedNote and went viral. Written from the perspective of an anonymous New Oriental employee, the post mocked Yu for effusively describing his pricey Antarctic journey while showing no understanding of staff struggling with overwork and relentless performance evaluations. Many netizens echoed the criticism, condemning business leaders who ignore widespread overwork culture. Others defended Yu, arguing he has the right to travel freely and that his wealth comes from decades of effort.

On November 20, Yu responded on Sina Weibo, promising that next winter he would select 10 outstanding employees and 10 customers to join a company-funded Antarctic expedition. On November 23, he posted an apology to all staff, further explaining his original intention of his Antarctica letter and calling for unity and mutual understanding within the company.

Beijing Private School Financial Crisis Sparks Concerns over Vulnerability of Sector

A financial crisis at a private school in Beijing has ignited widespread discussion about the challenges facing China's private education sector. Founded in 2016, ETU Enlighten School positioned itself as an innovative project offering "student-centered, whole-person education" by combining global pedagogical approaches with a culturally grounded Chinese curriculum.

Much of its early visibility came from its celebrity co-founder, Li Yinuo, whose reputation lent credibility to the school's mission to free students from stressful, exam-oriented teaching.

However, on November 11, Li announced through her WeChat account, Nuli Society, that ETU had fallen into a severe financial crisis: it could no longer reliably pay staff salaries or settle debts owed to suppliers. The disclosure triggered controversy within the education sector and intense debate on social media. Matters escalated further on November 23, when both Li's WeChat video account and Nuli Society were suddenly banned without explanation, fuelling public suspicion and speculation.

Li herself is a major source of public attention. She holds a biology degree from Tsinghua University and a PhD in molecular biology from UCLA, and has served as a global partner at McKinsey and as director of the China Programme at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. In 2010, Li and her husband launched Nuli Society, where she regularly published essays sharing views on social issues and personal growth, attracting over one million followers. To many parents, Li represents the ideal of academic excellence, professional achievement and educational innovation.

But the crisis at ETU has prompted many netizens to question the fragility of China's private schools, even when led by someone as accomplished as Li. Private schools, which often charge high tuition fees and promise an alternative to the high-pressure public system, face inherent disadvantages compared with government-funded public schools, including unstable financing and high turnover of teachers and students. Their educational practices are also often questioned. These vulnerabilities make them more exposed to risk.

INFLUENCER

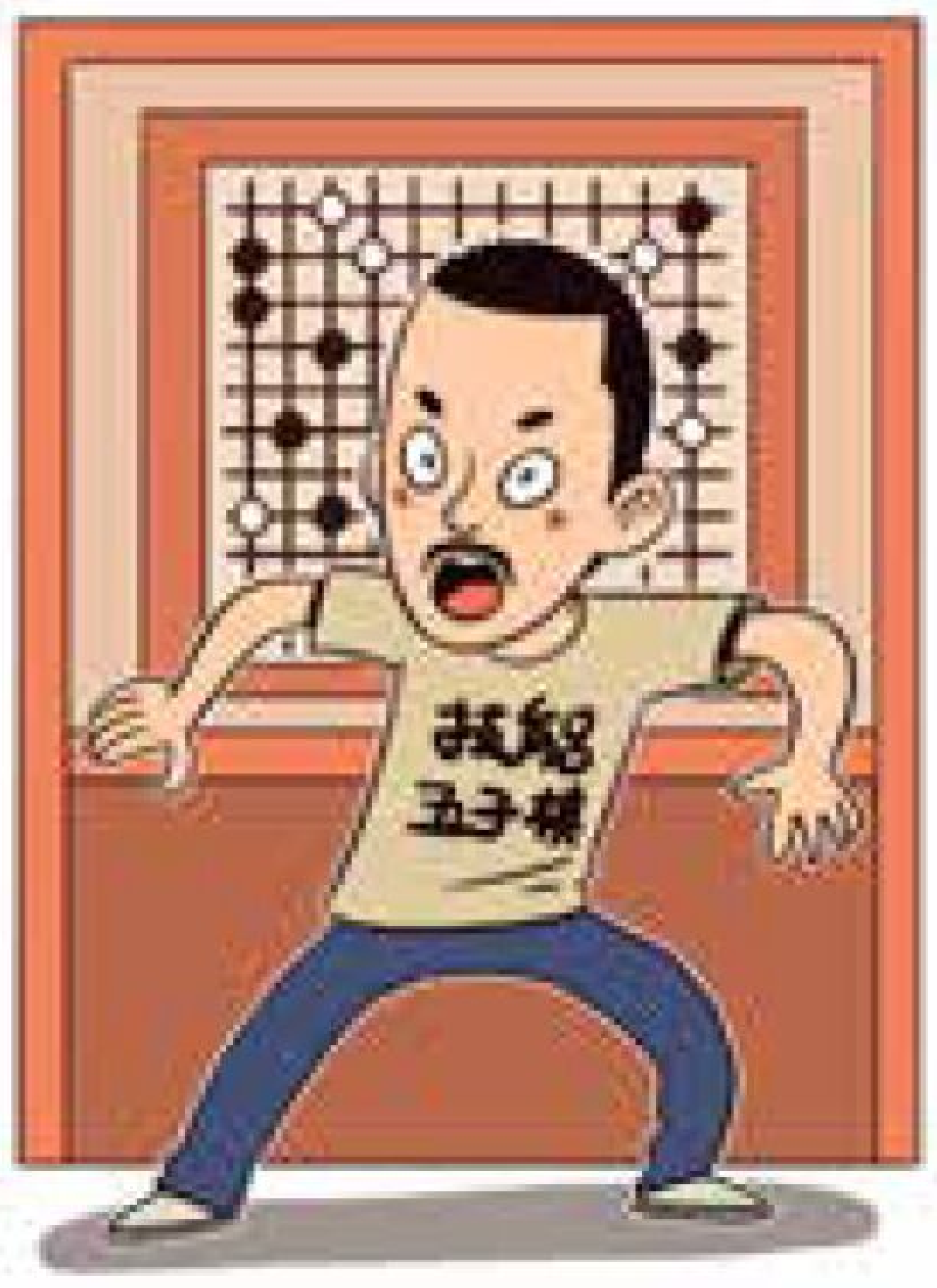
Zhang Xingchao

Has anyone ever seen an alien perform comedy? Zhang Xingchao has made it feel possible. The 28-year-old comedian became an overnight sensation thanks to his uniquely "abstract" comedic style showcased on the hit variety show *Amazing Night 2*, which aired from September 26 to December 6, 2025. On the show, Zhang teamed up with fellow comedian Li Jiacheng to form the duo Waixingcong ("Two Aliens"), unleashing a wave of what netizens have dubbed "alien comedy."

Their 14-minute sketch "Gomoku with Skills" exploded across the Chinese internet, accumulating more than one billion views since its September 26 broadcast. Gomoku, also called Five in a Row, is a strategy game in which players use black and white stones to connect five pieces on a board. The sketch follows a young man attempting to defeat a Gomoku master and his disciple at a Gomoku school. Zhang, who plays the school's founder and the eccentric master, quickly stood out. Unlike most comedians who rely on traditional setups, punchlines and plot twists, Zhang gets laughs through illogical, absurd and highly physical performance choices. Onstage, he often appears blank and emotionless, moves with spring-loaded joints, and behaves in strange, unpredictable ways "like watching an alien do comedy," as many viewers commented.

Born in 1997 in Anhui Province, Zhang cycled through several jobs before becoming a comedian. He received flight-attendant training at Anhui Vocational College of Art, studied drama performance at Anhui University in Hefei, and worked as a restaurant waiter, delivery-platform salesman and karaoke-bar attendant. Yet he always felt his true passion lay in performance. "Gomoku with Skills" propelled him to instant fame, winning audiences over with a comedic style full of imagination, absurdity and unexpected surprises.

In addition to his viral bit, Zhang performed two other standouts on *Amazing Night 2*: "Bangbang Grocery Store" and "Two Punches All of a Sudden." Viewers now refer to them as the "Zhang Xingchao Trilogy." The comedian has already garnered more than 206,000 followers on Sina Weibo.



'Old Poor Aesthetic' Emerges as New Gen-Z Fashion Statement Amid Rejection of Conspicuous Consumption

One of the biggest fashion buzzwords among young Chinese in 2025 may be *laoqiongfeng*, or "old poor aesthetic." The term is a tongue-in-cheek counterpart to *laoqianfeng*, meaning "old money aesthetic." In recent years, the old money look, associated with the understated elegance of traditionally wealthy families, has dominated social media. Gen-Z users frequently share photos and videos tagged with the trend, showcasing tailored suits, crisp dress shirts, refined polo shirts and other classic staples.

But a counter-trend has now emerged. Many young people are embracing what they call the "old poor aesthetic," opting for faded T-shirts, worn jeans, loose vests, slippers and any clothing that is inexpensive, casual and comfortable. For them, following the "old poor aesthetic" does not mean aspiring to a life of poverty. Instead, the trend champions thrift, simplicity and a rejection of consumerism.

China-Japan Relations

Contingency or Provocation?

Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi's framing of a Taiwan contingency as a threat to Japan's survival is widely seen as a direct challenge to the post-World War II settlement, contradicting Japan's longstanding political commitment that Taiwan is part of China

By Yu Xiaodong

When right-wing Japanese politician Sanae Takaichi became Japan's prime minister in October 2025, many observers were concerned it would lead to a deterioration in China-Japan relations. But few expected she would ignite tensions so quickly.

Responding to a question from an opposition lawmaker during a Diet session on November 7, Takaichi stated that a "Taiwan contingency" could constitute a legally binding condition under Japan's controversial security legislation enacted in 2015 that would allow Japan to exercise its right to "collective self-defence." In other words, Takaichi suggested that Japan would intervene militarily in a Taiwan conflict.

Taiwan and WWII Order

Having visited the controversial Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo, where some convicted Japanese Class-A war criminals are venerated, five times in the 16 months prior to taking office, Takaichi has long been known as an unapologetic nationalist and a China hawk. She is widely considered the torchbearer of late Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe's political legacy, who had raised the idea that any contingency concerning Taiwan would be an emergency for Japan in 2021.

While Abe made this remark only after he stepped down from office, without specifying what kind of emergency it meant for Japan, Takaichi became the first sitting Japanese leader to publicly declare a so-called Taiwan contingency as an existential threat to Japan and link it to possible use of force.

Her remarks triggered strong reactions from China. On November 13, Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Sun Weidong summoned Japanese Ambassador to China Kenji Kanasugi, warning that Takaichi's remarks challenge the core interests of China and seriously undermine the political foundation of China-Japan relations.

China's Ministry of Culture and Tourism and the Ministry of Education soon issued notices advising Chinese tourists and students to avoid travelling to Japan, leading to the cancellation of many cultural exchange events. It is estimated that more than 1,900 flights involving 16 Chinese airlines between the two countries were cancelled in December. China also halted imports of Japanese seafood and suspended talks on resuming Japanese beef imports.

The China Coast Guard intensified patrols around the disputed Diaoyu Islands, known as the Senkaku in Japan. China's military, the People's Liberation Army (PLA), has conducted several live-fire drills in the Bohai Sea and Yellow Sea since late November.

China's strong reaction stems from its assessment that Takaichi's remarks not only violate the one-China principle, but also constitute a clear indication that Japan intends to overturn the post-war international order.

Defeating China in the first Sino-Japanese war (1884-1885), Japan forced China's ruling Qing government to cede Taiwan in 1895, ruling the island for 50 years until the end of WWII. The 1943 Cairo Declaration, signed by the US, Britain and China, stated that "all the territories Japan [had] stolen from the Chinese" were to be restored, including Taiwan. The 1945 Potsdam Declaration reaffirmed this, and Japan formally accepted it in its Instrument of Surrender.

On this basis, China considers the restoration of Taiwan a key element of the post-WWII international order and Taiwan's status as an integral part of China as settled in 1945. Earlier in October 2025, China's National People's Congress officially designated October 25 as the Commemoration Day of Taiwan's Restoration.

Furthermore, when China and Japan normalised relations in 1972, they signed a joint communique, then later signed agreements known as the four political documents, in which

高市発言
戦争への火打石
消火活動中
高市が国難
平和と暮らしを
おびやかす
高市発言撤回を
STOP 改憲・北区の会

Hundreds of Japanese citizens protest against Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi's Taiwan remarks outside her office, Tokyo, Japan, December 4, 2025 (Photo by VCG)

Japan stated that it "fully understands and respects China's position that Taiwan is an inalienable part of China."

Given Japan's historical colonialism in Taiwan and wartime aggression, Takaichi's use of a "survival-threatening situation" to justify potential military action regarding Taiwan evokes memories of past occasions when Japan cited alleged survival crises to justify aggression, including the September 18th Incident (Mukden Incident in 1931 in China's northeast), the July 7th Incident (Lugouqiao or Marco Polo Bridge Incident in Beijing) in 1937, and the surprise attack on the US's Pearl Harbour in Hawaii in 1941.

"What's Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi up to by reviving the phrase 'survival-threatening situation?' Is Japan going to repeat its past mistakes of militarism?" asked Lin Jian, a spokesperson for China's Foreign Ministry at a regular press briefing on November 13. Calling Takaichi's comments a "blatant provocation to the post-WWII international order" and "a serious blow to China-Japan relations," Lin warned that "if Japan should dare to meddle in the cross-Strait situation, it would be an act of aggression and definitely meet a firm response from China."

Rise of the Far-Right

For many Chinese observers, Takaichi's provocative remarks reflect the rapid rise of right-wing ideologies in Japan's political landscape. Right-wing forces in Japan advocated expansionist ambitions and justified aggression before WWII, and have been holding negationist views towards Japan's past aggression against other Asian countries. These forces are also pursuing revisions to Japan's pacifist constitution that it adopted after WWII.

"Takaichi's comments reflect a fundamental shift in Japan's political dynamics, as the country's long-dormant postwar conservative ideology resurfaces and merges with growing populist frustrations amid the country's relative decline," Xiang Haoyu, a research fellow at the Department for Asia-Pacific Studies at the China Institute of International Studies, told *ChinaReport*.

As part of the post-WWII international order, Japan adopted a pacifist constitution that renounces the right to launch a war as a means of settling international disputes. For decades, Japan had adopted an "exclusively defence-oriented" policy.

In the meantime, Japan was allowed to preserve its imperial system and many elements of its militarist structure, as the US considered Japan an important ally during the Cold War. "Unlike Germany which dismantled its Nazi legacy, Japan never fully confronted the factors that led it to war. Instead, those political, institutional and ideological elements were largely preserved," Zheng Yongnian, director of the Advanced Institute of Global and Contemporary China Studies at the Chinese University of Hong Kong (Shenzhen), said in an interview with media outlet GBA Review on November 20.

The most prominent example is Nobusuke Kishi, a member of Japan's wartime cabinet and a suspected Class-A war criminal. Seen as a valuable anti-communism figure, Kishi was released by the US without trial after three years in prison, paving the way for him to become Japan's prime minister between 1957 and 1960. One of Kishi's central aspirations was to revise Japan's pacifist constitution. Kishi is regarded as the icon of the postwar right-wing forces in Japan. His political legacy was later embraced by his grandson Shinzo Abe, and is now passed on to Takaichi.

"A large number of Japanese war criminals were never held accountable after WWII and many returned to, and even thrived in postwar politics, the military establishment and the business world. This not only made it impossible to fully pursue wartime responsibility for wartime atrocities, but also laid the groundwork for the resurgence of right-wing forces in Japan," Yang Bojiang, director of the Institute of Japanese Studies at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, pointed out in a commentary published by bimonthly Party magazine *Qiushi* in December.

After several decades of rapid economic growth, the Japanese economy started to stagnate in the 1990s. In 2010, China surpassed Japan to become the world's second-largest economy. "Japan fell into what many call 'Japan's lost three decades,' with its national strength in decline, and this accelerated the rightward shift in Japanese politics and fuelled a broader conservative drift across society," Yang said.

Nationalist Agenda

In the past 10 years, Japan has sought to gradually hollow out its pacifist constitution.

In 2015, under the Abe administration, Japan passed a controversial security legislation, which relaxed its constitutional interpretation to enable the exercise of the right of "collective self-defence," precisely the concept Takaichi evoked. In December 2022, Japan announced plans to acquire a "counter-strike capability" to attack enemy bases preemptively. In 2023, Japan revised its arms export policy to permit the overseas sale of lethal weapon systems co-developed with foreign partners.

"Takaichi's hardline right-wing posture is driven by a nationalist ideology that can be traced back to the prewar 'imperial historiography,'" Xiang Haoyu said. "It seeks to break away from what it considers an overly self-critical, shame-inducing 'masochistic' view of history. While refusing to acknowledge Japan's wartime aggression and rejecting the verdicts of the Tokyo Trials as a foundational historical conclusion, it calls for the restoration of 'pride and dignity' of the Yamato nation, and reclaim Japan's past stature as a major power," he said.

Given Takaichi's right-wing position, the centrist Komeito Party withdraw from the ruling coalition, ending a 26-year partnership with the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), which has been in power almost constantly since it was founded in 1955, except for two periods of three years. The LDP instead formed a coalition government with the populist right-wing Nippon Ishin, or Japan Innovation Party.

Less than one month into her tenure, Takaichi has advanced a nationalist agenda far beyond the Taiwan Strait. In the same Diet session on November 7, Takaichi reaffirmed Japan's claim to the Dokdo islets, known as Takeshima in Japan, intensifying its territorial disputes with South Korea over the islands and prompting Seoul to postpone a planned joint naval search-and-rescue drill.

On November 11, Takaichi pledged to revive visits by former residents to the Russia-controlled islands off Japan's far north, reigniting rows with Russia over the disputed islands. On the same day, she also refused to endorse Japan's Three Non-Nuclear Principles that Japan will not "produce, possess or host nuclear weapons," a commitment formulated in 1965 and adopted by the Japanese government since then.

On November 13, citing various Japanese officials, Japanese newspaper *The Sankei Shimbun* reported that Tokyo is advancing plans to revise the rank designation system of the Japan Self-Defence Forces, replacing the current numbered ranking system with traditional military titles used by the Imperial Japanese Army and Navy during WWII.

On November 23, during a trip to Yonaguni, an island about 110 kilometres east of Taiwan, Japan's Defence Minister Shinjiro Koizumi told reporters that the country is planning to deploy medium-range surface-to-air missiles on the islands.

According to a November 17 report by *USNI News*, a publication under the US Naval Institute, Japan is rapidly expanding its long-range strike capabilities and recently tested a new hypersonic missile system. The first version, Block I, with capability to strike targets hundreds of kilometres away, is expected to enter active service in 2026, and future Block 2 and 2B variants of the missile are expected to have a range of between 2,000 to 3,000 kilometres. In addition to hypersonic weapons, Japan plans to deploy Tomahawk cruise missiles, Joint Strike Missiles and upgraded Type 12 surface-to-ship missiles in the coming year.

All of these moves mark a significant and substantive shift in Japan's postwar defence posture.

UN and US

On November 21, China's Permanent Representative to the United Nations Fu Cong submitted a letter to UN Secretary-General António Guterres elaborating on the Chinese government's position. Stressing that Japan is a defeated country of WWII and does not possess collective self-defence rights, the letter states that China can invoke the "enemy state" clauses in the UN Charter, meaning that if Japan uses force over Taiwan, China could launch a counterattack in accordance with international law.

The Chinese Embassy in Japan also

posted on X, stating that the “enemy state” clauses, or Article 53 and 107 of the UN charter, allow the victors of WWII – China, France, the Soviet Union, the UK and the US – to take military measures against former Axis powers, chiefly Germany, Italy and Japan, should they pursue aggressive policies, without requiring prior authorisation from the UN Security Council.

The spat between the two countries unfolded not long after the meeting between Chinese President Xi Jinping and US President Donald Trump held in Busan, South Korea on October 30, when the two leaders agreed on a temporary truce on their trade disputes.

Given the military alliance between the US and Japan and the US’s positioning of China as a strategic rival, Washington’s stance became a focal point. On November 25, Xi spoke on the phone with Trump in their first call after the Busan meeting.

According to the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Xi reiterated China’s principled stance on the Taiwan question, stressing that Taiwan’s return to China is a key part of the postwar international order, while Trump said the US acknowledges the significant role China played in the victory in WWII and understands the importance of the Taiwan question to China.

Within hours, Trump spoke with Takaichi over the phone. Although neither Washington nor Tokyo acknowledged that the two leaders discussed the disputes between China and Japan, *The Wall Street Journal* reported that Trump had advised Takaichi not to provoke China on Taiwan.

Escalation or De-escalation

While Tokyo has denied the report, Takaichi has apparently walked back some of her original remarks, but has still refused to clarify Japan’s stance on Taiwan. When questioned in a Diet session on November 26, Takaichi said her government only maintains “nongovernmental working-level relations” with Taiwan. While recognising that Japan has “renounced all rights and claims under the Treaty of San Francisco,” she still insisted that Japan is “not in a position to recognise Taiwan’s legal status.”

Sanae Takaichi (left), Japan’s then minister of state for economic security, visits the war-linked Yasukuni Shrine, Tokyo, Japan, on August 15, 2023, the same day as the 78th anniversary of Japan’s unconditional surrender in World War II (Photo by VCG)

Her reference to the Treaty of San Francisco met with a new backlash from China. The treaty was signed by 49 nations in 1951 to re-establish peaceful ties with Japan, which includes Japanese renunciation of its claims to Taiwan, but it does not specify China’s sovereignty over Taiwan. China was not invited to the San Francisco Summit, and deems the treaty “illegal and null and void.”

At a press conference on November 27, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Guo Jiakun criticised Takaichi for attempting to “hype up the so-called ‘theory of undetermined Taiwan status.’” Arguing that the San Francisco treaty goes against the Declaration by United Nations signed by 26 countries, including major allied countries in 1942, which prohibits a separate peace with enemy states as stipulated, Guo stressed that Taiwan’s legal status as an integral part of China has already been settled in relevant international documents, which Japan acknowledged in the 1972 Sino-Japanese Joint Statement.

In an apparent further step back, Takaichi said in another Diet session on December 3 that Japan’s position on Taiwan has not changed since the 1972 Japan-China joint communique. China again rejected her remarks.

“‘No change to the position’ is far from adequate and certainly unacceptable as a response to China,” Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Lin Jian said on December 4, “If Japan’s fundamental position on Taiwan is indeed as stated in the 1972 Sino-Japanese Joint Statement, can Prime Minister Takaichi accurately and fully articulate that position?” Lin said. “China’s stance is very clear: We urge the Japanese side to reflect on and correct its wrongdoing, and retract Prime Minister Takaichi’s erroneous remarks. This is an issue of principle,” he added.

According to Xiang Haoyu, given Japan’s domestic political dynamics, it is unlikely that Takaichi will explicitly retract her Taiwan contingency remarks. “Takaichi’s political rise has been built upon her image as a conservative hawk, and any sign of compromise would be seen as a betrayal that could put her leadership at risk,’” Xiang said, “Therefore, keeping a tough nationalist posture remains the preferred option.”

Meanwhile, the tension between the two countries’ militaries appears to be escalating.

On December 7, Japan’s Defence Ministry alleged that a Chinese J-15 fighter jet from the aircraft carrier *Liaoning* locked radar on a Japanese F-15 twice on December 6 in international waters southeast of Okinawa’s main island. China countered that the event was prompted by the Japanese fighter’s attempt to intrude into China’s training area to conduct close-in reconnaissance and interfere with China’s military activities.

As Takaichi remains reluctant to retract her remarks, no clear path to stabilising China-Japan relations is now in sight. If Japan’s security policy continues to shift rightward further, the two countries may be headed for a prolonged period of confrontation in the foreseeable future.★

WWII History

‘A War of Imperialism’

Historian Richard Overy, author of *Blood and Ruins: The Last Imperial War, 1931-1945*, reexamines World War II as a global war of imperialism that started with Japan’s invasion of Northeast China in 1931

By Cao Ran

Most Western history texts state that World War II started when Germany invaded Poland on September 1, 1939, leading to a declaration of war on September 3. But in recent years, this dominant Eurocentric interpretation of the WWII timeline has come increasingly under scrutiny.

Professor Richard Overy of the University of Exeter in southwest England, a renowned British WWII historian, argues the war was ignited much earlier in 1931, when the Japanese army invaded Northeast China, which became the prelude to a global war. Overy first raised the argument in his book *The Origins of the Second World War* (1987), and elaborated on his conjecture in *Blood and Ruins: The Last Imperial War, 1931-1945*.

Published in the UK in 2021 and in the US in 2022, the book won several prestigious awards and was a *New York Times* bestseller. Overy argues that the breakout of WWII should not be understood solely as a European phenomenon, but as a global crisis triggered by “empire building” ambitions of Japan, Italy and Germany to challenge the old British and French empires. Japan’s invasion and occupation of Northeast China marked the first major step.

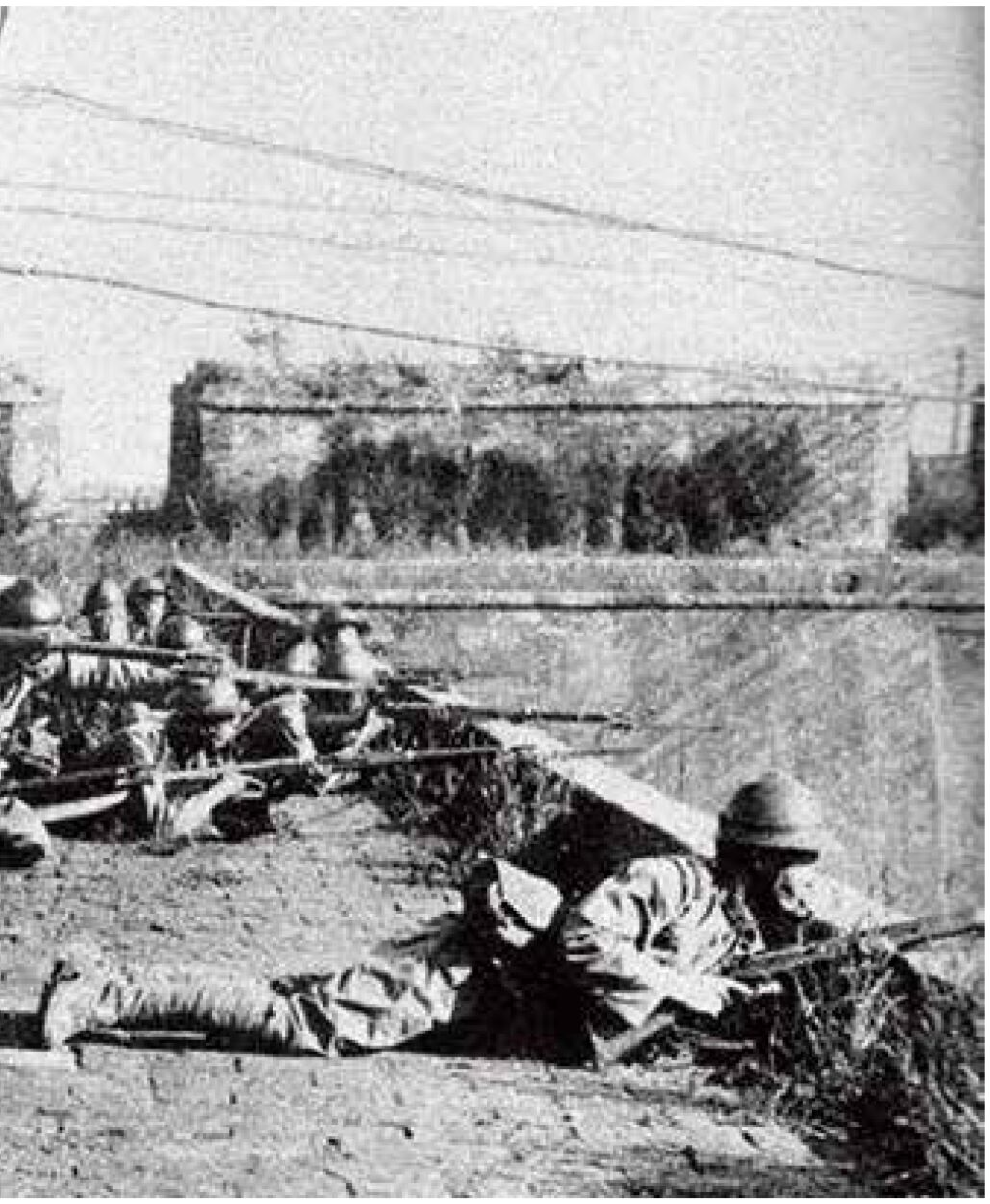
As Britain and France failed to hold back Japan’s expansionist ambitions, it not only emboldened Japan to embark on a full-scale invasion of China in 1937, but also encouraged Italy to invade Ethiopia in 1935 and Germany to annex Austrian and Czechoslovakian territories in 1938 and 1939, ultimately setting the stage for Germany’s invasion of Poland.

By tracing the starting point of WWII to Japan’s invasion of China in 1931, Overy has called to recognise China’s decisive role and huge suffering during WWII, which has largely been ignored in the West. The fierce resistance of China’s regular forces and guerrilla fighters forced Japan to fight a war on two fronts.

In December 2024, the Chinese-language edition of *Blood and Ruins* was published in China. The year 2025 marked the 80th anniversary of Victory in the Chinese People’s War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression and the World Anti-Fascist War. *ChinaReport* interviewed the author for his insights into WWII. Overy stressed that human society should learn from the war to better protect civilians and avoid radical strategies in wars today.

Professor Richard Overy (Photo Courtesy of Interviewee)

***ChinaReport*:** In your book *Blood and Ruins*, you put forward a groundbreaking argument in WWII historiography that the war did not begin in 1939 with Germany’s invasion of Poland, but in 1931 with Japan’s aggression in Northeast China. Why did you put forward



Japanese troops attack Chinese soldiers at Wairang Gate, one of the eight city gates of old Shenyang, Liaoning Province, September 19, 1931

The Japanese Army bombards the north cantonment of the Northeastern Border Defence Army of the National Revolutionary Army (NRA, the national army of the Kuomintang-led Nationalist Government) in Shenyang, Liaoning Province, September 18, 1931

this thesis? Has your thesis been widely accepted in the West?

Richard Overy: So far, most people see WWII as a war against Hitler, about Germany, and the other wars that have taken place are less important. But it seemed to me that missed the whole point of the WWII, which is really a war of imperialism. You have to put it in the context of European global imperialism for the previous century. European states, and then Japan, began to expand territory in the 19th century and continued to do so after 1919.

I see the Second World War as the end point of 300 or 400 years of European global empire building. The crisis is a global crisis, not a crisis just about Germany. And I think that by looking at it in terms of imperialism is the only way you can make sense of what the Japanese, the Italians and the Germans are doing. They're not just making war, they are seizing territory. They want to build a territorial empire to match the British and the French. And so that means fighting is just a way of getting the territory.

By the 1930s, territorial imperialism is out of date, that is what states did in the 19th century. But it doesn't stop Japan or Italy or Germany. They believe that the only way to become a really "great power" is by acquiring a territorial empire.

That's why I started in 1931, because Japan's invasion of northeastern China is the first step in the effort of these three states to build an empire.

There's been some disagreement, but I think on the whole people have been very persuaded by my thesis. I think that they've come to regard the traditional view of WWII as too Europe centered. And what they like, I think, is the fact you can now see WWII as a global event. It's an event that takes place in East Asia, in South Asia and the Pacific, in Africa, in the Middle East and in Europe. The only place that is not touched is the US, but the US finally decides to engage in all these conflicts anyway.

CR: Japan did not decide to invade all of China at first. But was that an inevitable outcome, especially after the Japanese military gained power after 1936? If the League of Nations had put more pressure on Japan, could a full-scale war have been avoided?

RO: I think the problem is that Japanese leaders, military and civilian, are driven on by this idea that somehow Japan has got to challenge the West. It's got to find a way of establishing itself as "the great power" in East Asia. And Britain and the US are about to stand in Japan's way.

So I think it was always inevitable that they would drive on into China in order to prevent Western powers from blocking Japan. And by moving on to China and seizing more resources, what Japan can then do is turn around and

Cavalry soldiers of the Northeast United Resistance Army led by the Communist Party of China

fight with more prospect of success against the US and the British Empire. But without resources, Japan can't do that. Japan in the 1930s would not have been able to challenge the US. Japan in 1940 had got all the mineral wealth of Northern China at its disposal. So this is really what drives the Japanese on.

It is possible that Japanese civilian ministers might have found a way to rein the army back. But I think the problem was that the army in Japan was very autonomous. So once it was in China, expanding, whenever it faced threat, it moved on until the final showdown with [the Kuomintang-led Nationalist government leader] Chiang Kai-shek in July 1937. But the Japanese are already thinking about how to dominate the whole of East Asia. It was therefore no accident that the war with the Chinese changed from a war of imperialism into a major conflict.

CR: How should we understand the connection between the global economic crisis in the 1930s and the war?

RO: I emphasise that in my book. I think the economic crisis is more important than what happens in 1919 [post-WWI]. I think in the modern world today, we can't really conceive of really quite how dramatic that crisis was. The economic crisis convinces the Japanese, Italian and German leaders that in the end, if they want their populations to survive economically, if they want to build a decent living standard, if they want to become a major economy, they will have to have territorial empire, and they will have to control an economic block, just like the British empire, the French empire, or the US in the Americas.

And they link these two things together that in the economic crisis on that scale, you can overcome it by seizing resources and markets, by expanding territory, by getting access to secure food supplies. And that certainly helped to drive Japanese imperialism in 1930s.

CR: Many Western historians think the Nanjing Massacre (1937) was not as serious as other things that happened in Europe, or some people question the number of casualties. Why do people want to point out the differences between these tragedies?

RO: Unfortunately, that's what historians do. But yes, there is a strong sense among Western historians that they're already talking about the big crimes, German crimes against Jews, German crimes against Russians, there's nothing quite like the Gestapo. Because they simply don't know what's going on in China. And Nanjing is just the tip of the iceberg of the number of the sheer millions of Chinese who died as a result of the war. I'm afraid it is difficult to estimate. The best estimate seems to be about 15 million, but there are wide variations on that. This is a huge number of people, and many of them are dying under atrocious conditions.

I think with Nanjing, the problem is the difficulty of getting precise statistics. It's true of much of the bombing in Europe, for example, where the nature of the bombing meant it was quite difficult to get precise statistics about the number killed. So people would often make up a number. Historians have had to try to reconstruct what happened to provide a number that's more realistic.

In the Japanese-Chinese war, I think that we're never going to know the precise number. Records were not kept, people disappeared and we don't know where they went. I think that we have to recognise that some historical pictures cannot be properly reconstructed, but there is no reason, absolutely no reason for thinking that the Nanjing Massacre did not happen.

People put flowers at Zhengjue Temple's Mass Grave of the Victims of the Nanjing Massacre in Nanjing, Jiangsu Province, December 12, 2023, one day before China's National Memorial Day for Nanjing Massacre Victims (Photo by VCG)

CR: If we look back at the 14 years of war from 1931 to 1945, how do you describe or summarise the contribution of Chinese people among the allies in this war?

RO: There are a lot of argument about this. And I think Western historians have tended to be quite dismissive of the Chinese military effort.

The Chinese military effort was very difficult to mount. China had very limited industry, few advanced weapons. It was difficult to recruit and train the armies. But two things are important. The first is the Chinese are the first to challenge this new wave of imperialism. They were fighting against Japanese empire building from 1931 to 1939 before the war in Europe began. And I think that in itself is an important point, because nobody else was fighting effectively against the rise of this new imperialism in Europe, for example, until Britain and France decided to declare war on Germany. So from that point of view, China is in the forefront. China is the first state fighting against that imperialism.

The second thing is that the Chinese didn't lose the war. They continued to fight from 1942 to 1945. The Japanese were not able to defeat them or to force a peace on them. They continued to resist. Whether they resisted well or badly, I think it doesn't really matter. What matters is the Japanese could not conclude the war in China, which meant that they were facing all the time a war on two fronts: a war in China and a war in the Pacific. And for a country like Japan, which was relatively weak economically and industrially, to divide their forces and resources in that way meant almost certainly it would not win either, and they didn't.

So Chinese resistance helps to maintain the Allied position in Asia. And I think that it's time that Western historians come to acknowledge that fully. Imagine that Chiang Kai-shek gave up. The Japanese would have dominated the whole of China, and would have used all their imperial resources for the war against the Americans in the Pacific. It wouldn't, I think, have been a different outcome, but it might have been a longer war.★

2025 Imperial Springs International Forum

Wellspring of Wisdom

Global leaders at the 2025 Imperial Springs International Forum agreed multilateralism remains essential for addressing conflicts, AI governance gaps and global uncertainty, calling for deeper dialogue and stronger cooperation

By Cao Ran

Imperial Springs, the venue of the forum, is a resort in Conghua Liuxi River Ecological Reserve, Guangzhou, Guangdong Province (Photo by CNS)

From December 1 to 3, the 2025 Imperial Springs International Forum, co-hosted by the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries, the Australia-China Friendship and Exchange Association, the Guangdong provincial government, and the World Leadership Alliance-Club de Madrid, was held in Guangzhou. This year's theme was "For Global Cooperation and Solidarity."

More than 200 participants, including former heads of state and government, leaders of international organisations, as well as Chinese and foreign scholars and business executives from over 30 countries, held in-depth discussions on major global issues such as security challenges, global governance reform, trade frictions and AI regulation. They reaffirmed their commitment to multilateralism and urged all parties to strengthen unity and cooperation to meet shared challenges.

Global Solidarity

At the opening ceremony, Yang Zhen, vice chairman of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, said China's major global initiatives on development, security, civilisation and governance offer Chinese wisdom for solving global challenges, and said that China is a "doer" when it comes to putting these ideas into practice.

In 2024, Chinese President Xi Jinping sent a congratulatory letter to the forum, noting that over the past decade the Imperial Springs International Forum has remained committed to promoting multilateralism, conducting in-depth discussions on global governance and sharing China's proposals. For three consecutive years, President Xi met with forum attendees in Beijing in 2017, 2018 and 2019.

Over the past decade, the forum has drawn more than 200 senior international political figures and over 600 Chinese and foreign scholars and business leaders. In December 2024, after the forum concluded in Madrid, UNESCO designated Imperial Springs as a "world peace practice base."

Chau Chak Wing, founding president of the Australia China Friendship and Exchange Association, told *ChinaReport* that the forum's creation and growth reflect the needs of a rapidly changing world. "The more differences we have, the more we need dialogue; and the greater the challenges, the more we must communicate," he said.

Test of Resilience

Nearly all the participants repeatedly expressed concerns over challenges and crises that the world faces today, including the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the Israel-Palestine crisis, rising geopolitical rivalry, countries openly challenging the postwar international order, tariff conflicts and "decoupling" threatening globalisation, as well as the US backtracking on climate commitments and global AI governance falling behind rapid technological change.

Danilo Türk, president of the World Leadership Alliance-Club de Madrid and former president of Slovenia, warned at the opening ceremony that few had expected the world order's sense of certainty to unravel so quickly. Two years ago, he told *ChinaReport* that multilateralism was being undermined. Now, the stability of the global trading system is also under severe pressure, driven by the tariff war launched by the Trump administration, Türk said. He told media during the forum that he worries the world is moving in a dangerous direction.

The year 2025 marks the 80th anniversary of both victory in the World Anti-Fascist War and the founding of the United Nations. Many senior political leaders said today's crises highlight the need to safeguard and reform the postwar international order based on multilateralism.

Former South Korean prime minister Han Seung-soo argued that more worrying than great-power conflict is what such tensions reveal: the weakening of the UN system. Romano Prodi, former prime minister of Italy, noted that so-called "trade wars" are not conflicts between ordinary people but products of political division and unilateralism.

Guests participate in a panel discussion during the Imperial Springs International Forum, Conghua District, Guangzhou, Guangdong Province, December 3, 2025 (Photo by CNS)

Türk emphasised that China's four major global initiatives offer a shared framework for strengthening multilateralism.

On October 20, the International Organisation for Mediation was inaugurated in Hong Kong. Türk described the institution as a new global public good contributed by China.

Former Canadian prime minister Kim Campbell said China's commitment to international governance aligns with Canada's values, and that Canada welcomes China's constructive role in reinforcing the multilateral system.

'Genuine Dialogue'

At the forum, guests could scan a QR code to place a coffee order. A robotic arm would then select ingredients and create patterned foam. Within a minute, a robot-made latte with "Imperial Springs International Forum" printed on top was ready.

Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga, co-chair of the Nizami Ganjavi International Centre and former president of Latvia, told *ChinaReport* that in the digital age, technology should have made people more empathetic and understanding, yet information channels are still used to spread bias. Sitting at the same table, she said, does not constitute dialogue if participants arrive with fixed views and simply wish to impose them on others.

Former Norwegian prime minister Kjell Magne Bondevik and former Austrian chancellor Sebastian Kurz stressed that dialogue must extend beyond governments and include academia and other sectors.

At the closing ceremony on December 3, Türk said participants had reached a shared understanding: the world urgently needs a platform that can bridge geopolitical divides, encourage the exchange of ideas, foster dialogue, and drive action. The Imperial Springs International Forum provides exactly that, he said.

"Today, unilateralism is resurging, the international system is under strain and global challenges are escalating. How to reform and improve global governance and safeguard global stability and prosperity has become a pressing question," Chau Chak Wing said. He added that the Imperial Springs International Forum will continue to "bring together the power of unity, uphold the banner of cooperation and work towards a fairer future."★

DIGITAL FALLOUT

In our world of endless screens, more young Chinese are drifting into internet addiction,fracturing families and feeding a shadowy detox industry. But experts say expanded support and resources for parents could prevent more from slipping through the cracks

Digital Addiction

Disconnected Relationships

Parents and children describe how online gaming has strained family ties amid a generational communication gap many find hard to bridge

By Yue Qiuyuan, Ni Fenfen and Xie Ying

"I work hard, I never bow down to other people and I've never done anything bad, but my son is disappointing. Online games have harmed my family too much," Zhu Qin told *ChinaReport* after he finished his shift at a construction site in Huzhou, Zhejiang Province. He looked exhausted and sad, sweat dripping down his forehead and nose. Zhu's teenage son had been accused of theft to get money for online games, media had reported.

According to The Fifth National Survey Report on Internet Use Among Minors published by the Central Committee of the Communist Young League in December 2023, by the end of 2022, China had over 193 million internet users under 18, 97.2 percent of the total number of the age group. The internet penetration rate in primary school increased from 89.5 percent to 95.1 percent from 2018 to 2023. More than 90 percent of juveniles own internet-enabled devices, mostly mobile phones.

The survey found that among young internet users in 2022, 67.8 percent play online games, with 32 percent using their parents' accounts after China's cyber authorities introduced restrictions on how much time children can spend on gaming.

Besides, 51.8 percent of parents out of the 11,624 parents sampled said they have great concerns about children's internet use, with time spent on gaming and short videos the biggest issues.

Parents told *ChinaReport* their relationships with children are deteriorating, and they are often struggling to reconnect.

'Totally Changed'

Wang Mingxiang, a 62-year-old single father in Southwest China, only found out how obsessed his son was with gaming when he discovered 20,000 yuan (US$2,817) was missing from his bank account. His son had stolen the money and spent it on online gaming.

"That money was donated to me for my medical expenses," Wang said, who has had kidney disease since 2019. He has to do dialysis every two days.

Wang told *ChinaReport* his son's obsession started in 2022 when students were quarantined at home due to the Covid-19 pandemic and he had to use a mobile phone to take online classes. After successfully claiming the money back from the game developer, Wang threatened severe consequences if his son played the game again.

But two days later, he was gaming again. He failed to get into high school, although he used to be a good student. Now, he boards during the week at a residential vocational high school. He goes home on weekends, but just plays games day and night, waiting for Wang to cook for him after he finishes his dialysis.

Wang spoke of the closeness of their relationship before his son's gaming addiction. "He went with me to my hospital appointments and comforted me during my dialysis... but after his gaming addiction, he totally changed and refused to talk with me," he said. "Once when I tried to talk with him, he told me to get out."

Online Victims

He Qing did not believe her son was addicted to online games until his teacher told her that his grades had plummeted. His classmate with whom he shared a desk was so addicted that he played all night, and had even attacked his mother, He said.

He believes children are victims of online gaming, and that they need saving.

At first, He, who lives in Central China's Anhui Province, tried playing games with her son, but finding her skills lacking, her son quickly tired of playing with her, she told *ChinaReport*.

Her son, now 26, once voluntarily gave up his phone and told her not to give it back until he finished his homework. But just a week later, she found that he was increasingly reluctant to give her the phone and stayed on it longer and longer, much more than the agreed-on 15 minutes.

"I gingerly reminded him he'd already spent too much time on his phone, but he got upset," He said.

Zhu Qin's son is treated in hospital after allegedly being beaten in a conflict over an online game (Photo Courtesy of Interviewee)

A student hides a phone during class to play an online game (Photo by VCG)

Wang Mingxiang also agreed on time limits with his son, who promised to study hard and limit his phone use to a maximum two hours a day. But his son broke the deal several days later, and threatened to commit suicide if Wang took away his phone.

In desperation, Wang turned to a local TV station for help. They brought a psychologist to Wang's home. After they spoke, Wang's son cried and said he would give up gaming. "I want to hang out," he said.

Wang took his son on days out, to department stores, parks and zoos. But whenever they went out, his son wanted to shop. "He wanted everything he saw, so I was spending hundreds of yuan whenever we went out. When I stopped buying him things, he started gaming again," he said.

As children grow and get stronger, threats of physical punishment are not a deterrent. Zhu Qin said his son beats him. "Once he beat me so violently I couldn't stand up. Online games have made him cold towards his family," he said.

Liu Qingxia, who lives in Yangzhou, Jiangsu Province said her son, now 32, started gaming when he was around 9 years old. If they tried to discipline him, he would self-harm. Once when she unplugged his computer, he ran out of the house and straight into a busy road, nearly getting hit by a car.

"Both me and the driver were really shocked. Ever since then, I haven't dared to directly challenge him," she said.

Spiritual Prop

When Wang asked his son why online games are so addictive, his son replied "online games are my spiritual prop. I only feel happy when I'm gaming."

According to psychologists, the instant dopamine hits online games provide are a huge temptation for emotionally immature children.

Beijing-based internet addiction expert Jiang Wen says a typical child gaming addict is one who feels under pressure, dissatisfaction with their life, reluctant to open up to people, and lonely or ostracised at school. Their families are usually restrictive and parents spend little time talking, except to nag.

Zhu Qin's son lived with his grandparents in Anhui Province until he was a teen. He was already addicted to gaming by the time he went to live with his father.

Jiang Cheng, 16, told *ChinaReport* his parents were always busy working and he and his sister were raised by their grandma in Wuhan, Hubei Province. He was being bullied at school, and his parents paid no attention.

Online games became his biggest comfort.

"I forgot everything when I played. It took me away from the real world for a while. It made me happy," he said. "My friends in game communities chatted with me, comforted me and backed me up against the bullies and my parents. They told me they'd listen to anything I had to say. I was moved, and I was thinking finally, there are people willing to listen to me," he said.

Xiao Ting, now 32, recalled she liked being online when she was a teenager to stave off loneliness, since her parents were busy with their business and no one was there when she got back from school.

"We never understood each other. Although many people told me my parents loved me, I didn't feel the love," she said.

"I admire the parent-child relationship where they're like friends who can talk about anything with parents, like gossip and what kind of boys I like," she added.

Jiang Wen said there is an enormous lack of healthy communication between parents and children in China.

"We did a survey at a school and asked 100 parents whether or not they have communicated with their children that day. Eighty percent said yes. But when we asked the 100 children the same question, only 20 said yes. Many parents had no real connection with their kids. Their only communication was nagging, and the kids just ignored that," she said.★

All interviewees are pseudonyms

Digital Addiction

Screened In

A growing industry of online gurus and harsh 'correction' camps is feeding on parents' anxieties over internet addictions, blurring ethics and legality while leaving vulnerable children at risk

By Li Qinhua and Xie Ying

Many Chinese parents have long expressed concern about their children's addiction to online games, especially as digital devices have become integral to their daily lives, study and socialising.

In response, authorities introduced a series of measures to curb children' screen time. The most recent was in 2021, when regulators required game developers to block children from logging in. Their only windows are 8 to 9 pm from Friday to Sunday, and public holidays. Other times, children are not allowed to play games at all.

The measures have shown some effect. A 2022 survey by the Game Working Committee of the China Audio-Video and Digital Publication Association reported that the proportion of children spending less than three hours a week on online games (including those who do not play online games) had risen to 75 percent. Overall gaming time and in-game spending among children also dropped year-on-year.

Yet the numbers have done little to ease parents' concerns. Both parents and media have noted that many children are bypassing the log-in system by using their parents' IDs or renting adult-verified accounts through marketplace platforms like Xianyu. Others have shifted to watching short videos on platforms like Douyin, where restrictions on children are far looser.

Experts say parents' anxiety over their children's online habits is fuelling a new industry for treating internet addiction that operates in two main forms: selling online parenting and psychology courses, and running offline centres or camps claiming to help children overcome addiction.

According to a 2025 report by social media platform Lanzi Jihua, the industry is estimated to be worth nearly 70 billion yuan (US$9.9b) annually.

Seeking Saviours

Qian Li, whose son is struggling with internet addiction, said she was deeply moved when she came across the Douyin influencer President BoBo, who claims to have worked in family education for 14 years. In her videos, President BoBo warns that online games and mobile phones are harming children, likening them to opium.

President BoBo has nearly 2.25 million followers on Douyin. Her online shop on the platform, where she sells courses and books, has more than 200,000 visits.

"It's crunch time," the vlogger said in one livestream Qian watched. "If you love your kids more than your life, why would you hesitate to pay 4,980 yuan (US$700) to save them?"

These words, Qian said, spoke directly to her heart. She purchased the course, which promises to teach parents how to "parent more wisely."

Across social media, phrases like "shut down games and save children" have become key traffic drivers. On Douyin, the hashtag "electronic games are a kind of mental opium" has been viewed more than 220 million times.

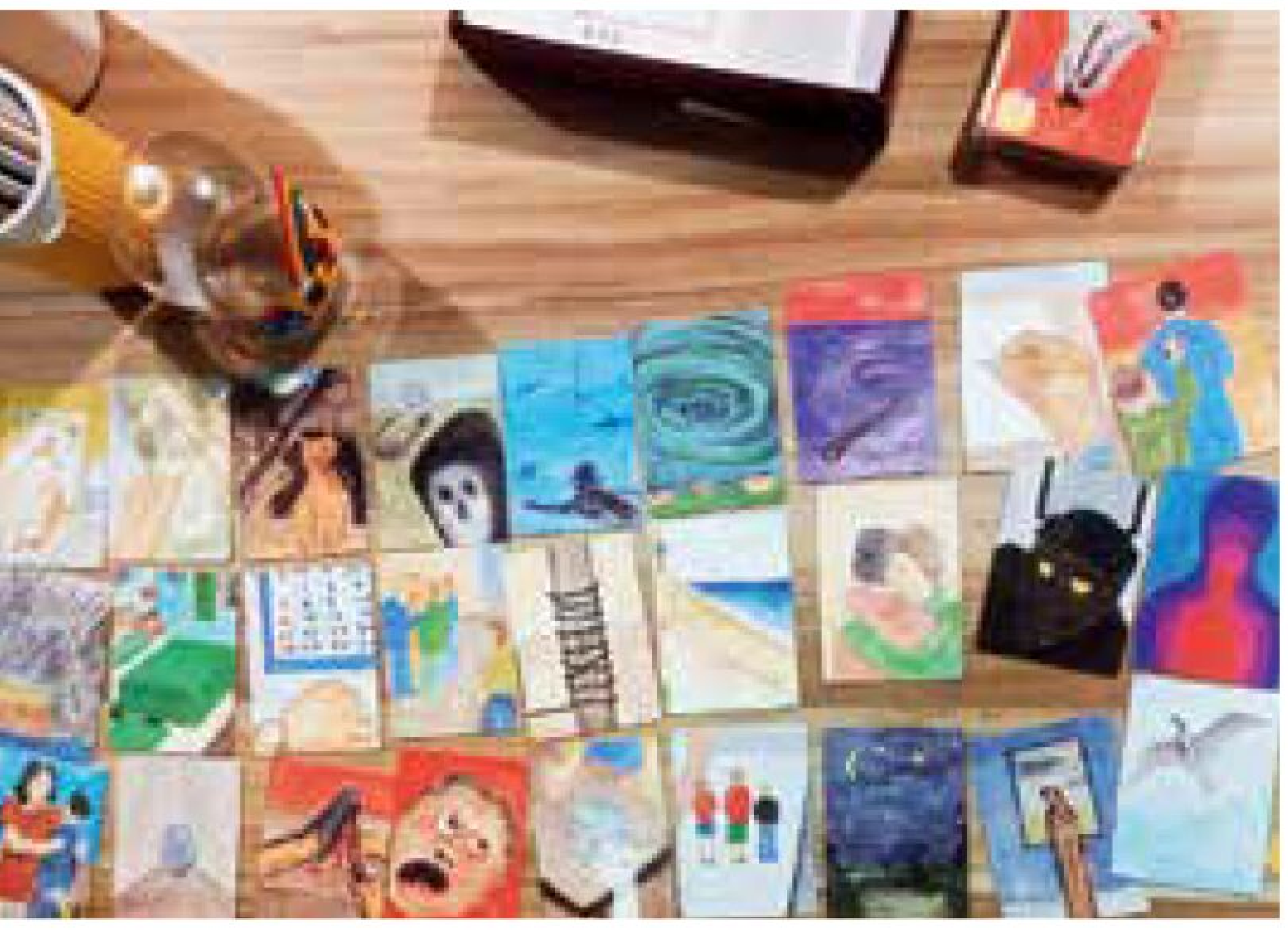
When a *ChinaReport* reporter commented under a similar topic pretending to be a mother seeking help for her internet-addicted child, she was quickly contacted by companies offering training. All claimed they could cure internet addiction within days and ensure children no longer "indulge in the internet," "rebel" or "resist studying."

ChinaReport observed that online courses often lure potential customers through inexpensive trial programmes priced from as low as 9.9 to 99 yuan (US$1.40-14). A five-day, 99-yuan similar course on Douyin has sold 128,000 editions.

Low Threshold

The industry's booming sales are largely driven by promotions from vloggers and livestreamers, particularly online celebrities. One of its most prominent promoters, Wang Kun, entered the field in 2020 as short video platforms surged. Media reported that Wang previously worked as a fish monger, waiter, deliveryman and cosmetics seller. He first gained traction in "family education" by

Students play a board game in a mental health session at an internet addiction centre in Fujian Province (Photo Courtesy of Interviewee)



Drawings by inmates at an internet addiction treatment centre (Photo Courtesy of Interviewee)

Xu Xiaoxi's arm still bears scars from alleged physical punishments at an internet addiction treatment centre (Photo Courtesy of Interviewee)

calling online games "mental opium" that would erode children's willpower and ultimately "ruin the future of the whole country."

These extreme statements have since disappeared from his accounts. Now, he promotes training programmes priced at 29,800 yuan (US$4,200).

Wang operates more than 10 business accounts on Douyin. His most popular has 4.22 million followers. Data from feigua.cn, a short-video analytics site, shows the account livestreamed 23 sessions from October to November, generating between 75,000 and 100,000 yuan (US$10,600-14,100) in sales.

"Wang Kun is the industry's top blogger," Chen Zhuo, who works with a multi-channel network (MCN) company, told *ChinaReport*, revealing that top creators like Wang now market to potential customers through offline meetups.

Chen told *ChinaReport* that MCN companies, which manage influencers' careers, have already moved into the sector. Another insider, speaking on condition of anonymity, said these companies have complete ecosystems for generating popular influencers, from faking backgrounds and creating online identities to crafting targeted topics that attract potential clients and funnel traffic into paid courses, all while avoiding platform oversight.

ChinaReport asked several MCN firms whether new practitioners need credentials in psychology or education. Their response: "Not really." One company even said an influencer could claim to be a Tsinghua University graduate "without a diploma, as long as viewers believe it."

Offline training institutions are also pouring into the market. Wen Kai, who works for a course-selling company in Jinan, Shandong Province, said his firm previously focused on academic tutoring but shifted to an "invisible intervention" service for internet addictions. Priced from 10,000 to 60,000 yuan (US$1,400-8,450), these interventions involve guidance counsellors that pose as online friends to engage with the child and subtly influence their behaviour, usually over three to six months.

"We tell parents that psychologists and hospitals are useless and that our companion-style service is the only solution," he said, adding that the company relies heavily on advertising and sales pitches. A top-performing salesperson can earn up to 50,000 yuan (US$7,050) a month.

Yet many parents say these services are ineffective. Zheng Xin, who paid 8,800 yuan (US$1,239) for a similar programme, told *ChinaReport* she quickly realised she had been scammed. Her high-school-aged son recognised the ruse immediately. When she sought a refund, the company cut off communication.

Because Zheng never signed a formal contract, she could not file an official complaint.

She is far from alone. On Black Cat, a consumer complaint platform under web portal Sina, a search for "invisible intervention" services brings up numerous grievances from parents who say the programmes are useless and often worsen family conflict. One complaint alleged that the service consisted only of texting the child or playing video games with them, far removed from promises to “restore a sunny and disciplined child in two months.”

Shocking Abuse

In previous years when such services and online courses were rarer, parents turned to “anti-internet addiction” centres. Many of them have since been exposed for physical and mental abuse of children.

In 2022, Zheng Xin sent her son to such a school, despite multiple media investigations into allegations of beatings, confinement and even electroshock therapy. Zheng said she paid 30,000 yuan (US$4,225) for seven months.

To this day, her son refuses to tell her what happened there. Zheng says guilt keeps her from asking.

“I regret sending him to the school. But there’s no medicine for remorse,” she said.

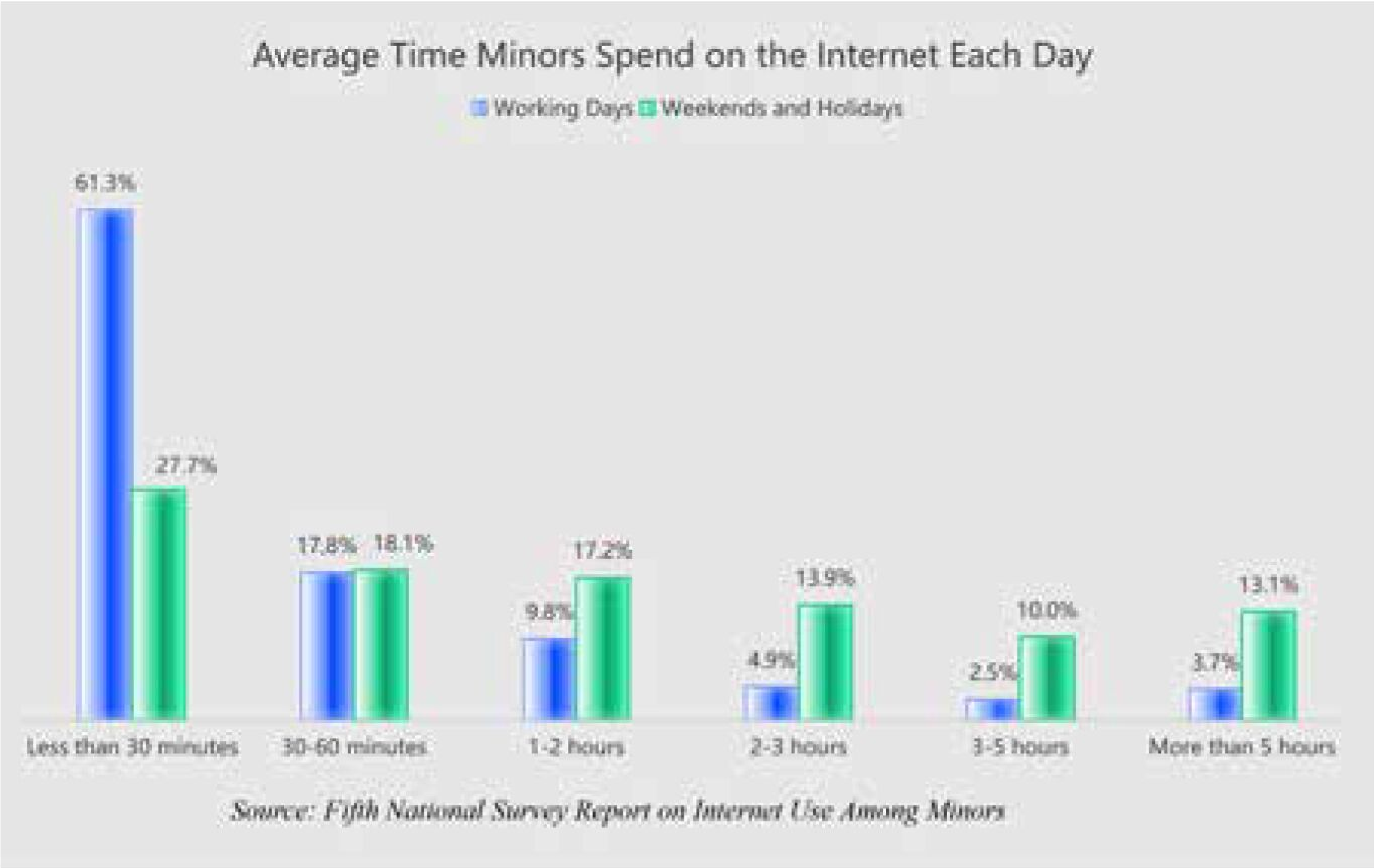
Li Chi, 24, told *ChinaReport* his mother had him committed to Yuzhang Training School, a well-known internet addiction treatment centre in Jiangxi Province, when he was a teenager in June 2016.

Upon arrival, Li claimed he was stripped down to his underpants and locked in a dark room for seven days. In his cell, he saw messages by other children scratched into the walls with their nails, reading “I hate my parents” and “Sorry, my father and mother.”

Soon after, Li attempted suicide by drinking laundry detergent and was then released to his mother. He had so much fear of being sent back that he stayed awake for three nights armed with a knife to fend off school employees.

“They usually carted off children at midnight,” Li said.

Li said he always left his window cracked open, giving himself an escape route in case they returned, even though the family lived on the seventh floor. A year later, authorities shut down Yuzhang Training School, charging them with “illegal confinement.”



Source: Fifth National Survey Report on Internet Use Among Minors

Internet addiction centres have faced strong public criticism since at least 2009 for alleged physical abuse, yet they continue to operate, often rebranded as “behaviour correction,” “quality training” or “summer camps.”

When *ChinaReport* searched “internet addiction” on enterprise registration site qichacha.com, only a few inactive entities appeared. But a search for “behaviour correction” returned 271 companies.

Social media outlet Lanzi Jihua estimates that at least 600 such institutions operate nationwide.

According to a 2010 survey by China Youth & Children Research Centre, most children are coerced or tricked into these facilities. Many lack qualified teachers or staff and routinely use corporal punishment and confinement.

Xu Xiaoxi, 15, told *ChinaReport* he was forced into a correction centre by his parents in March 2025. The facility, located on the grounds of an abandoned primary school, was surrounded by high walls lined with barbed wire. When Xu resisted, several staff members allegedly struck him in the abdomen with a rod. They then threw him into a dark room and informed him he would undergo six months of “education.”

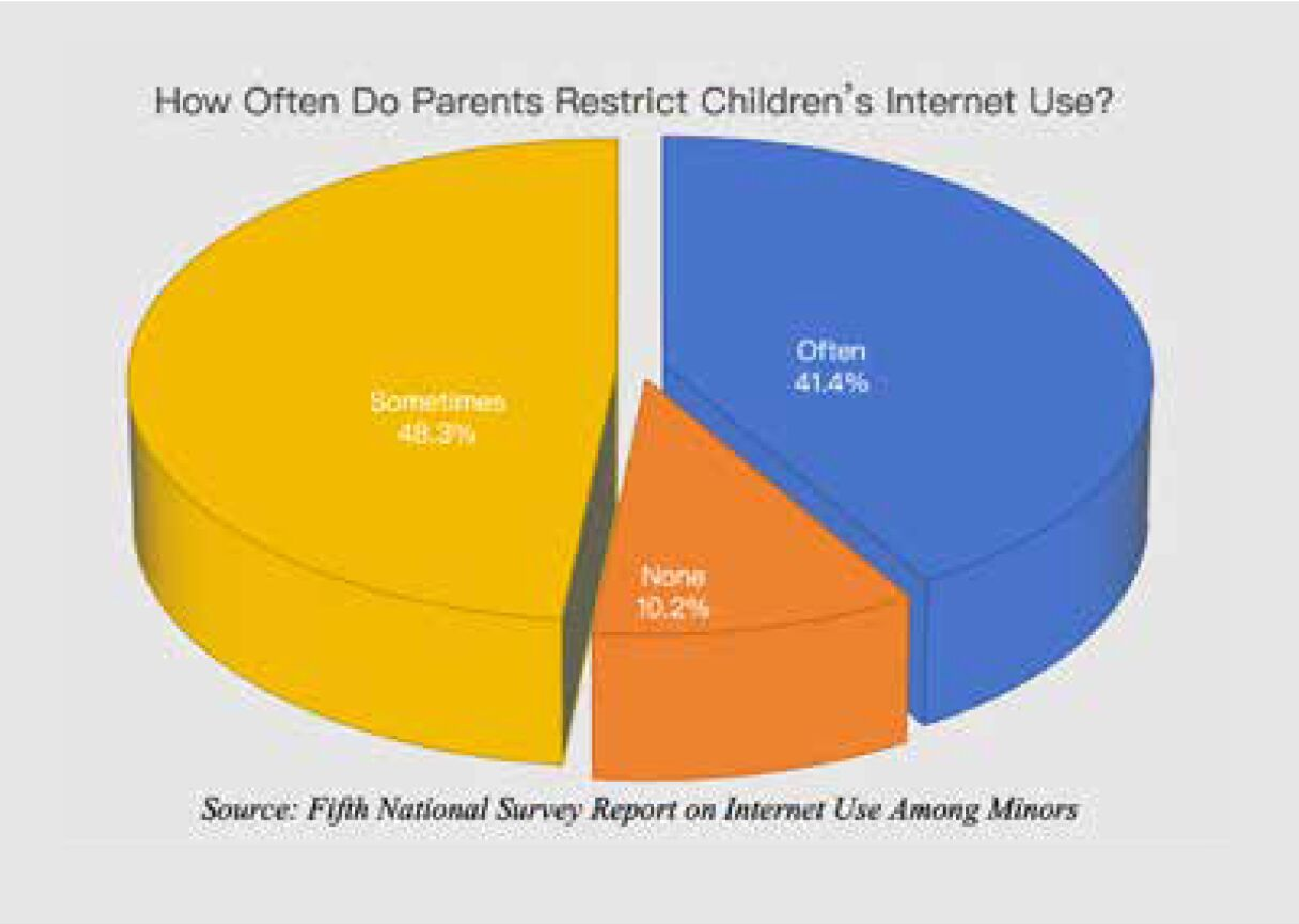
Xu later learned the programme cost 28,000 yuan (US$3,950), money his mother had borrowed.

“Instructors beat students at any time and force them to train even while injured. Rods, clothes hangers and even stun batons were commonly used to punish those they saw as ‘disobedient,’” Xu claimed, adding that his arm still bears scars from a beating.

“The leaders supervise for ‘safety’ to avoid serious injuries or escapes. Punishment usually lasts about 45 minutes, and they ask students to sign forms saying they received it voluntarily,” Chen Jing, a former instructor at a Jiangxi Province facility, told *ChinaReport*.

After leaving the centre, Xu and several classmates reported it to local authorities and even the county mayor. But as their parents had signed an agreement with the institution, the complaint was forwarded back to the centre. Several instructors visited Xu’s home, took him out to dinner and pressured him to withdraw the report. The case ended with the dismissal of the most violent instructor, but the centre remains operational.

Yang Weihua, a lawyer at the Shanghai-based Dehehantong Law Offices, told *ChinaReport* that gathering sufficient



Source: Fifth National Survey Report on Internet Use Among Minors

evidence of illegal confinement or child abuse is extremely difficult due to vague legal boundaries, the closed-off nature of these facilities and children's inability to collect evidence. "Unless something serious happens, it's hard to bring a case," he said.

Although some centres have shut down after media exposure and public criticism, many pop back up under new names. Because they are often registered as "non-enterprise organisations," a status in China for social enterprises that combine commerce with charity, they fall under fragmented oversight from multiple authorities.

Outsourced Anxiety

The public often questions why parents send their children to facilities known for using violence. Liu Qinxue, a psychology professor at Central China Normal University in Wuhan, Hubei Province, who studies internet addiction, believes it stems from companies' promising to "return a disciplined and obedient child" to families already desperate for help.

Zheng Xin told *ChinaReport* that her son had been addicted to online games for years. Even when his teacher confiscated his phone, he borrowed money from classmates to buy another. He threatened suicide unless his parents returned the device.

"Some parents are overwhelmed by worries about their perceived failure in parenting, and they turn to third-party institutions," said Rao Yichen, an associate professor at Utrecht University in the Netherlands who has conducted fieldwork at an internet addiction centre in Beijing. "Whatever these institutions sell, parents will buy," he added.

"The key is that parents want us to do the punishing for them, to force the kids to obey," said Chen Jing, the former instructor.

According to Zhang Zhiyi, another former instructor at one such facility, most institutions like his actually accept children with an array of issues beyond internet addiction.

"They take kids who fight, steal, smoke, refuse to study, or who are simply rebellious or introverted," he said. "Physical punishment is their main selling point."

Many online parenting courses reflect this trend. Influencers like President BoBo and Wang Kun offer programmes covering a broad range of childhood behavioural problems, pushing the idea that parents must "study hard" to learn proper parenting skills.

"Parents today often feel lost," said Li Na, who has a 10-year-old son. "We care more about children's mental health than older generations did, and we want to move away from traditional corporal punishment. But many parents feel that gentle communication just doesn't work, at least not as quickly as a stick."

Her son is not addicted to the internet, but Li said he has other issues, like short attention span, procrastination with homework and frequent backtalk.

Li said she has read multiple parenting books and taken trial courses, but none delivered the results she expected.

"They always talk about general principles. Every parent already knows those," she said.

Qian Li agreed. She told *ChinaReport* that influencers often urge parents to "keep learning," warning that a parent's energy will decline otherwise. "They just want you to keep buying new courses," Qian said.

But when asked if she would continue paying for the programmes, Li Na hesitated to say no. "Maybe I will keep trying. I really want clearer guidance on how to raise my child."

"To some extent, parenting courses and internet addiction institutions allow parents to outsource their anxiety," said Rao.

Easing that anxiety comes down to providing more resources for parents, said Yuan Ningning, an associate professor at the Institute for Human Rights at the China University of Political Science and Law.

"In the long run, we should strengthen public services to provide more parenting guidance and support, and promote them through legal frameworks. This would help reduce the space for illegal and unlicenced institutions," Yuan said. ★

Qian Li, Wen Kai, Zheng Xin, Xu Xiaoxi, Zhang Zhiyi, Chen Jing, Li Chi and Li Na are pseudonyms

Digital Addiction

Logged Off Life

As more young people become hooked on online games, parents are struggling to access appropriate treatment as gamers retreat from social interaction

By Sun Houming and Hu Kexin

子戏正在上演
本杀
YOUR SERVICE

A behavior therapy room at Beijing Huilongguan Hospital, Beijing (Photo by CNS)

Feng Jun (pseudonym), a university sophomore, said he once played online games for 10 hours straight when he was a high school student. He was immersed so deeply in the virtual world that he got angry when his mother wanted him to log off.

He knows obsessive gaming is a bad habit that is hard to overcome, but he never knew it is considered a disease. In 2019, gaming disorder was listed in the 11th version of the International Disease Category (ICD-11), falling in the category of "disorders due to addictive behaviours" just like gambling or smoking.

Although the listing sparked controversy, many countries including China now offer treatment options.

Diagnosis and Controversies

Feng said he started gaming obsessively in junior high school, but in senior high school, his parents only allowed him to use a smartphone on weekends.

"It had quite the opposite effect, so when I got my hands on the phone, I'd play for more than 10 hours a day," he said.

He saw other students at school with phones, and said he could not bear it. He saved up his pocket money to buy a secret phone. This meant he spent even more time gaming, and his grades suffered.

Feng's behaviour shows clear signs of gaming disorder. According to the ICD-11, gaming disorder is a pattern of "persistent or recurrent gaming behaviour" such that it takes precedence over daily life and continues despite negative consequences.

"We have to simultaneously meet three characteristics to make a definite diagnosis of gaming disorder: first, being out of control, meaning you control when to start and stop gaming, and how and where they play. Then gaming has become the most important thing in one's life, overriding other things like eating, sleeping, going to school and other interests, and finally one does not care about the bad consequences of gaming, even though they are clear about that," Zhong Na, deputy director of the rehabilitation department at Shanghai Mental Health Centre, told *ChinaReport*.

After gaming disorder was listed as a disease in 2019, some gaming companies in Europe and North America pushed back, issuing a joint statement which claimed there was insufficient evidence to support this diagnosis, and that it could be covering up other issues such as depression, media reported.

Zhong said that controversies around gaming disorder concentrate on fears about children being "labelled" or with "exaggerated diagnoses," but she argued that gaming disorder was listed by the ICD because clinically, there is an enormous number of people in need of treatment.

"Giving gaming disorder a disease diagnosis helps promote normative study and intervention," Zhong said. "Generally speaking, the current diagnosis of gaming disorder is relatively conservative," she added.

Yang Kebing, director of the addiction medical centre at Beijing Huilongguan Hospital, told *ChinaReport* that physicians now have clear criteria for diagnosis and patients' clinical manifestations, and the only area for discussion is how severe the addiction is.

"Because some patients conceal key information like how long they play, we have to consult parents and teachers

too. And not all different types of clinics have the same ability to diagnose mental health conditions like this as they don't have experienced physicians, so there can be differences in diagnoses," he said.

Some experts believe gaming disorder is an evolving concept that may be adjusted in the future. Yang agrees, saying the problem is not just obsessive gaming but uncontrolled use of the whole internet, including social media and short video platforms like TikTok. The concept of "gaming disorder" may be too narrow to cover all those addictive behaviours.

"In the future, we may develop a broader diagnosis, such as 'internet use disorder' to cover more complicated addictive behaviours," he said.

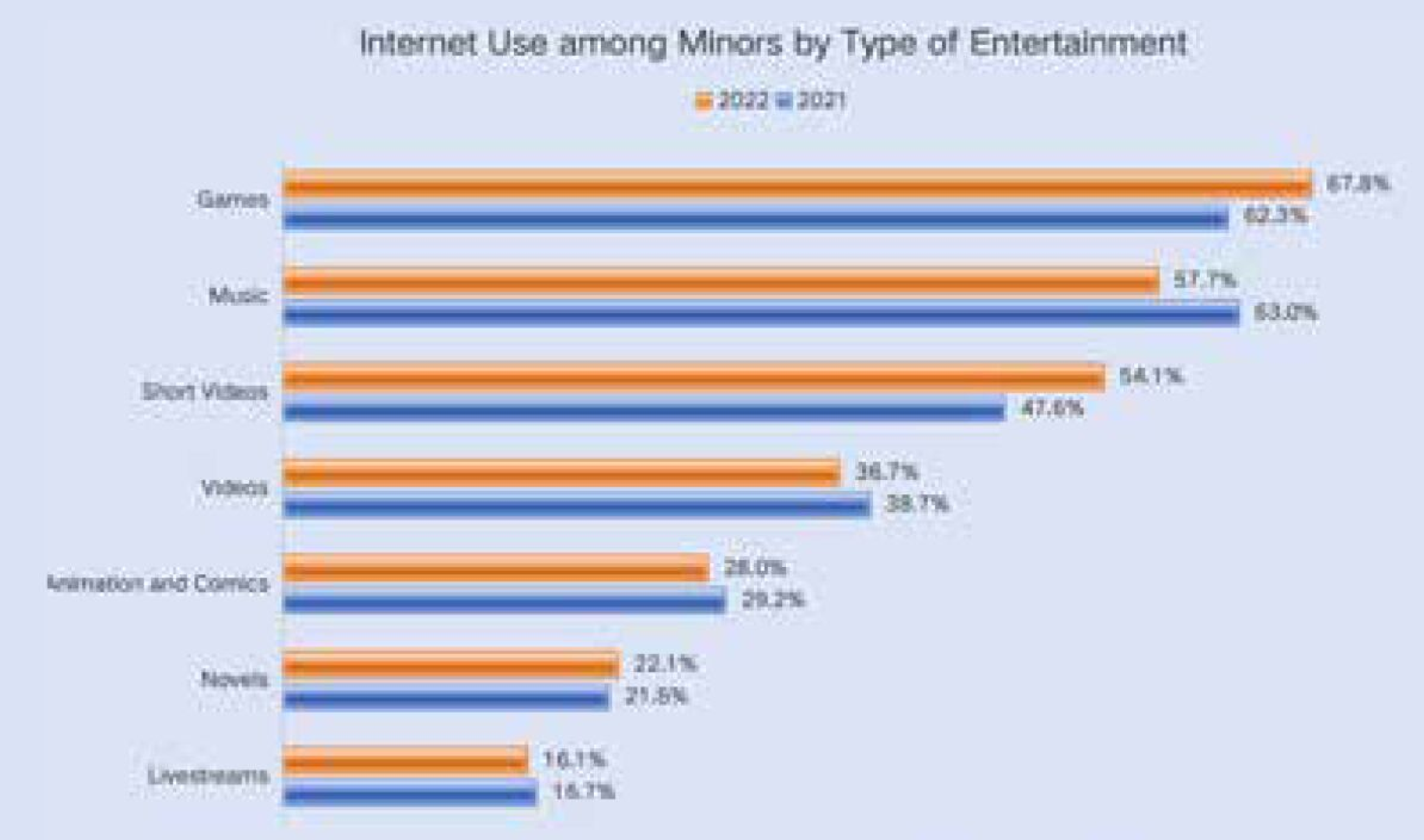
High Risk for Youth

In July 2019, the psychiatry branch of the Chinese Medical Association and several other institutions published a "common understanding" on the prevention and treatment of gaming disorder, revealing that based on research, the prevalence of gaming-related disease was 3.5 percent to 17 percent, with the average rate of gaming disorder stable at around 5 percent. The common understanding also pointed out that the case rate of gaming disorder may be higher in Asian countries than in European and American countries, with males, children and teenagers predominating.

Zhang Jintao, a physiology professor at Beijing Normal University, told *China Report* that people aged between 10 and 25 are at the highest risk for gaming disorder, lured by intense visual-audio stimulation and rapid, clear and abundant positive feedback.

One game designer who spoke to *ChinaReport* on condition of anonymity said when they design games, they set tasks that are precisely timed to provide rewards. Many of the development team studied psychology or are experienced gamers, and they understand what makes players continue gaming, which is one of their main aims.

"Games have many positive functions, but it's true that a great many professionals are trying hard to extend playing time," Zhang said.



Source: Fifth National Survey Report on Internet Use Among Minors

Zhang pointed out that some brain functions do not fully develop until the age of 25, which is an added risk factor. The functions include rational thinking, planning ability and logical thinking. Games appeal to the young as they are more compulsive, adventurous and emotional than older people. But the case rate of gaming disorder gradually drops when people start working or get married.

According to Yang Kebing, gaming disorder often goes alongside other symptoms, usually depression, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), anxiety and obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), and sufferers can become violent.

"Few of my patients suffer just from gaming disorder. Around 70-80 percent also have other mental diseases," Yang said. "Many weren't that interested in online games at first. But when those with depression, for example, are feeling low and have little interest in anything around them, gaming brings them happiness for a while, like a way of self-healing. When they stop, they find the real world is even darker than before so they become reliant on gaming until it develops into a disorder," he added.

"So, gaming disorder interplays with other mental diseases and they aggravate each other," he said.

According to Yang, the mechanism that makes people gaming addicts is similar to other addictive behaviours. It stimulates the brain's reward circuit, and this constant stimulation develops into addiction. When the stimulation decreases, people display withdrawal symptoms like being uncomfortable, anxious and irritable.

Gaming disorder patients are described as being highly impulsive, highly neurotic and introverted. But the disease is also influenced by biological, social and cultural factors.

"The higher rate of gaming disorder in eastern and southeastern Asian countries is related to intense educational competition, the spread of electronic products, weakened social intercourse in the real world, and campus bullying – these easily drive children into the virtual world," Yang said.

Gaming disorder causes both physical and mental problems, according to Zhang. "Long-term gaming causes deteriorating eyesight, and being sedentary increases the burden on bones, muscles and joints. It also causes a vicious cycle of anxiety and pressure, and feelings of regret and isolation," he said.

"Research shows that gaming disorder changes the functions and structures in the brain. When there are changes to how the prefrontal cortex functions, people's ability to rationally weigh advantages and disadvantages is impacted. They become addicted to the thrill of instant small returns," he added.

"Gaming disorder robs people of the best time in their life. Even if they're no longer addicted when they get older, the damage is done. It can be hard to recover the injured [brain] functions, and in some severe cases, sufferers become socially withdrawn. For example, the *otaku* subculture in Japan is mostly addicted to online games," Yang said. *Otaku* is used to describe young people who are obsessed with interests such as gaming, anime and manga, often to the detriment of social interactions.

Acting Out

Yang revealed his hospital can tailor treatment to each patient, and while there is no special intervention or medication, psychological treatment is generally effective.

"Some patients really want to change and quit their addiction, but they don't really understand the extent of the problem, so they act out," Yang said.

A mix of motivational talks and cognitive behaviour therapy for those who also suffer anxiety might help them recognise and adjust their negative thinking and improve their mood and behaviour, he said. Current treatment focuses on psychological treatment supplemented by medication, physical treatment and rehabilitation.

For some acute gaming addicts who experience withdrawal symptoms, Yang's hospital uses "replacement therapy," where non-electronic group games replace online games, such as dramatisations and role playing. This helps guide patients to acquire positive emotional experiences to reduce loneliness and establish interpersonal relations to replace the satisfaction patients get from online games.

"Like quitting gambling and smoking, treating gaming disorder is quite difficult and it may easily recur. Parents should temper their expectations as their children probably won't recover

Beijing Huilongguan Hospital uses sandplay as a mental health treatment (Photo by CNS)

immediately when they're admitted to hospital," Yang said, adding treatment must be sustained and patients might be readmitted if they relapse.

"The treatment doesn't aim to stop them from ever playing a game again, we focus on controlling these uncontrolled behaviours," he said.

Yan Yunhe, a psychologist and social worker at the Inner Mongolia University of Finance and Economics in Hohhot, told *ChinaReport* social workers play a big role in treating gaming disorder, as they can develop therapeutical interventions alongside family, classmates and teachers.

"There's been research on university students showing that self-awareness training may change a sufferer's desire for and emotional response to online games and thus reduce their psychological reliance on games," Zhang Jintao said.

Feng Jun agrees, saying he now games much less after getting interested in outdoor sports. He gets a sense of achievement from climbing. "When I found new interests, I no longer desired the positive feedback from online games," he said.

Early Intervention

What troubles physicians is that many patients refuse or resist treatment, and many parents have little knowledge about medical treatment options.

It is a common problem worldwide. A 2023 report by the Japan Gaming Disorder Investigation Institute showed that only 30 percent of respondents would know who to consult if they fell victim to gaming addiction. Among them, only 1 percent have sought advice.

In 2019, Shanghai Mental Health Centre launched a small nationwide investigation and found 15 percent of the surveyed children were at high risk. They had overused the internet but not yet reached the level of "addiction," while another 5 percent already suffered from gaming disorder.

"We found many children that have reached the diagnosis criteria for gaming disorder don't go to hospital, and many have already experienced serious functional impairment, self-isolating for a long time. It's hard for them to get appropriate treatment," Zhong Na told *ChinaReport*.

"Gaming disorder sufferers seldom seek help on their own initiative, and even though their parents might force them to go to hospital, they refuse to be hospitalised. Many parents even go to hospital alone, but the doctors can't give accurate diagnoses without seeing the patient," Yang said.

"The majority of parents go to a hospital just to try, and the sufferers might ask to be discharged after just a few days' treatment," he added.

"Many of my colleagues have a child that's addicted to gaming, but they didn't go to hospital, because they had no idea how effective the treatment is," a mother of a junior high school student in Shenzhen, Guangdong Province, told *ChinaReport* on condition of anonymity.

Yang partly attributes parents' misunderstandings about medical treatments for gaming to "addiction treatment centers" that have already been operating in China for many years.

These institutions either have little effect, as their treatment is often not aligned with evidence-based medicine, or have been accused of multiple instances of abuse, including physical punishments. This has contributed to parents losing trust in all methods of treatment.

Zhang emphasises the importance of early treatment. "Compared to seeking help after there have been serious consequences, it's far better to prioritise prevention and control," he said.

The "common understanding" puts emphasis on early recognition, early diagnosis and early intervention. It calls for medical institutions, schools, families and society to make joint efforts in prevention.

"Shanghai Mental Health Center and several other institutions in the city launched joint prevention programmes involving families and schools to identify potential addictive behaviours as early as possible and take measures to prevent them from developing into gaming disorder," Zhong said.

According to Yang, prevention of gaming disorder is clinically divided into three phases: recognition and public awareness, measures by schools and families to prevent gaming disorder, and intervention for those already diagnosed.

"Parents should immediately seek help from a hospital if they find their child's grades are slipping and their social interactions are declining. After an evaluation, even though a child has not yet reached the diagnosis criteria for gaming disorder, doctors can help parents with time management and emotional control to help repair their relationships with their children," he said.★

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Education

Class Action

As China's birth rate falls and with it school enrollments, primary teachers are encouraged to switch careers. Some welcome the change, but for others the sums do not add up

By Sun Houming, Lin Qixin and Xu Ming

Worried by the decline in new student enrollment at her middle school in Yongzhou, Hunan Province, Liu Xiaoan had already been mulling a career change when an opportunity arrived in August 2025. After sitting an aptitude test, Liu left her classroom days behind for a position at a public institution. It is a big change for many teachers, who once believed they would be educators for life. But as China undergoes dramatic demographic shifts, there are simply not enough school jobs to go around anymore.

That month, authorities in Yongzhou announced they were opening up new positions specifically for primary and middle school teachers under 45 to address the issue of declining school enrollment and the teacher surplus. Yongzhou, situated in south Hunan, administers 11 counties and districts in a sub-tropical mountainous region, crisscrossed by rivers. Liu said it was the first batch of jobs reserved for teachers her county offered, although this time there was little rivalry.

"Most teachers are taking a wait-and-see approach. The number of openings outnumbered the applicants, so competition wasn't that intense," Liu said, adding that most applicants were young primary school teachers.

After peaking at 17.86 million births in 2016 when the country's one-child policy was completely annulled, China's birth rate has declined every year since. From 2016 to 2023, the number of births almost halved. Ministry of Education data shows that in 2024, the number of primary school enrolments nationwide was 16.17 million, 2.61 million fewer than the previous year. The number of primary schools nationwide

A primary school in Yichang, Hubei Province welcomes new students, September 1, 2025 (Photo by VCG)

also decreased by 7,200 schools compared to 2023, totalling 136,300.

As the school-age population decreases, provinces are already issuing plans to help redundant educators find new jobs. Areas in Hunan, Fujian and Shandong provinces are transferring primary and middle school teachers from towns to cities, moving them to support roles in schools or offering them other local government jobs.

Being a teacher was long-considered among the most secure jobs one could get in China, akin to having tenure in a university. Now, educators are having to rethink their career and life choices.

Surplus Supply

In the autumn term of 2022, the junior middle school where Liu taught, had three classes in each grade, with total enrollment of 410 students. In 2024, there were only two classes per grade when the new term began, with only 330 students in total enrolled. In September, it was combined with a primary school, which only had one class for first and second graders.

"Township primary and middle schools were the first to be affected. It's because there are fewer children, but also because families are moving to cities," Liu said. Teachers will need to find new jobs before they are made redundant, she added.

Liu used to be a head teacher, a tiring job requiring many administrative tasks. She put a lot of energy into providing extra help to children of migrant workers, who are often left with other family members in rural areas. These children made up the majority of students in her school. Her job and responsibilities made her feel stressed and caused health issues, so she decided to shift to work in the public sector. Although her salary was much the same, and she lost the long winter and summer holidays, she felt "unexpectedly relieved" by the change.

Unlike Liu, who was among the first to transfer, most teachers are hesitant. Some of her former colleagues are still asking her about the salary and benefits of the new jobs. They care about the long holidays, salary and their current job ranking, which could be lower if they take a new position. Some worry that because they have taught for years, they will find the adjustment hard. The types of jobs on offer are usually in the public sector, in government-affiliated institutions like libraries, museums or hospitals, Liu said.

Other places are encouraging teachers to make the leap. On August 4, Hengyang County, a rural area with a population of 1.2 million in 2024, announced it would transfer 230 primary or middle school teachers to other jobs in places like libraries or the government press office.

Shen Na, who has taught in Hengyang for 10 years, told *ChinaReport* that her school encourages teachers to sit the test for one of the new jobs. She said teachers who are young, have a short tenure or are lower in the school hierarchy are more willing to change. So far, about 200 teachers have accepted new positions.

In 2019, there were 12,282 births in Hengyang County. This figure dropped to 5,763 in 2024, half the number of primary school graduates that year.

Hengyang started the job programme two years ago. In 2024, only 100 opportunities were available. This year, it raised its game, offering double the number of posts, including in core government agencies and lifting the age cap to 40.

"The bar to change your job is lower than last year. There are more openings and the jobs on offer are better," said middle school teacher Chen Yang. He just passed the exam for a job as a public official.

Meanwhile, teachers in Hengyang are feeling increasing pressure to make a change.

Hengyang announced that those eligible for transfer who either do not sign up or fail to meet the new standards and teacher appraisals in joining the county-wide competition for teaching positions will be barred from applying for public sector jobs or other positions within their current school. It called on schools to encourage teachers to transfer and promised to keep posting new jobs for redundant teachers.

A teacher from Hengyang County who asked for anonymity told *ChinaReport* that she discovered that teachers who fail to make the grade in the new appraisal system might only be allocated to support roles like security guard or cafeteria staff. "So some teachers signed up to transfer jobs out of fear," the teacher said.

The transition places higher demands

Top: A woman feeds a snack to a child in a stroller on Qianmen Street, a popular tourist spot in Beijing, January 17, 2023 (Photo by VCG)

Above: Students skip with their teachers at a primary school in Yongzhou, Hunan Province, September 10, 2025 (Photo by VCG)

on teacher competencies. To stay competitive in their new roles requires them to have a range of complementary capabilities and skills beyond teaching.

In September, Hengshan, a county administered by Hengyang, released a notice that 93 teachers must compete through a written examination for 37 positions in county-level public sector jobs. This provides non-teaching roles such as administrative and secretarial positions, yet the competition is fierce. A primary school teacher from a township revealed that 15 people fought for one admin position she applied for at the county education bureau.

Inevitable Change

In some places in Hunan and other provinces, redeployment of teachers across different educational stages is a more common way to address the teacher surplus. In September, in response to a request from a member of the public on a platform run by Hunan's press office, Huaihua County education bureau, also in Hunan, replied that given the rapid decline of births, the number of students has already dropped most quickly in primary schools, which means inevitable redundancies.

Huaihua has already started redeploying teachers from other counties and cities back to where they came from. Some qualified primary teachers are transferred to middle schools.

Liu Ran, a primary school teacher from Changsha, told *ChinaReport* that she was told that primary teachers who have secondary education teaching credentials or master's degrees will transfer to middle schools. "I was told to prepare for that change before 2029," Liu Ran said.

Ma Xuelei, director of the All-China Chamber of Commerce for Private Education Investors, said that Hunan has already experienced one of the quickest declines in the school-age population, which is why it has already started redeploying teachers.

Some counties in Shandong, Fujian and Jiangxi provinces are following suit.

In August, Fengcheng in Jiangxi Province announced it was moving rural primary teachers to middle schools which lack teachers, and in the same month, primary and middle school teachers in Linyi, Shandong Province were informed they would start teaching high school.

"While the number of children for primary school and pre-school education has drastically declined, middle schools are navigating peak enrollment," said Liu Shanhuai, a professor from South China Normal University who has been paying close attention to the adjustment of education resources. He said this imbalance is a challenge for many provinces in Central China.

Secondary Chance

It would seem an easy solution to shift lower school teachers to high schools to deal with staff shortages. But the situation is complicated given the significant differences in teaching models and focus from primary to secondary schools. "There's a question about whether these surplus teachers can meet the requirements of schools that lack staff," Liu Shanhuai said in an interview with *Southern Weekly*.

If they do not have appropriate training to suit the new grades, standards and teaching quality will be affected. This will be reflected especially among those who are reluctant to transfer because of difference in teaching responsibilities, workload intensity and skills.

Liu Min, a maths teacher in a middle school in Linyi, Shandong Province, was transferred to a local high school in August. She told *Southern Weekly* that she has no confidence in teaching her students well, and is worried her students are already better at maths than her.

She described this transfer as "imposed on" her, adding that teachers will take the new job with a more positive mindset if they volunteer to transfer. What is worse, her salary is nearly 2,000 yuan (US$281) lower at the high school, despite the heavier workload.

Tang Zhisong, a professor of education at Southwest University in Chongqing, believes that teachers should not be forced to move schools, but should be allowed to choose whether to remain in education or leave the sector.

Several interviewed analysts believe it is important to take teachers' professional background and experience into consideration, and be clear about their willingness and capability when implementing teacher transfer policies.

"It's important to make sure the allocated teachers meet the demands of schools that take them in," said Liu Shanhuai. Teachers consider many factors when making these decisions, so their salaries should reflect their job responsibilities, working hours and job intensity. "Establishing a comprehensive salary system is crucial to resolving the challenges in cross-level teacher allocation," he said.

Targeted training to suit teachers' new roles is essential, and some places are already taking action. In August 2025, Linshu County in Linyi organised training for nearly 200 new teachers and teachers who are transitioning from primary to high schools to help them adapt.

In March 2025, Fuyang District in Hangzhou opened its first training class for teachers who can take on jobs in different educational phases. It will aid 50 young primary school teachers who have secondary education teaching credentials to teach in middle schools. The district plans to create a talent pool so trained teachers can transition to new positions as the need arises in the decade ahead.

China's school-age population is experiencing a "wave-like" fluctuation across educational stages, which first impacts kindergartens, then primary schools, middle schools, high schools and universities. As time passes, there will be more redundancies, interviewed experts said.

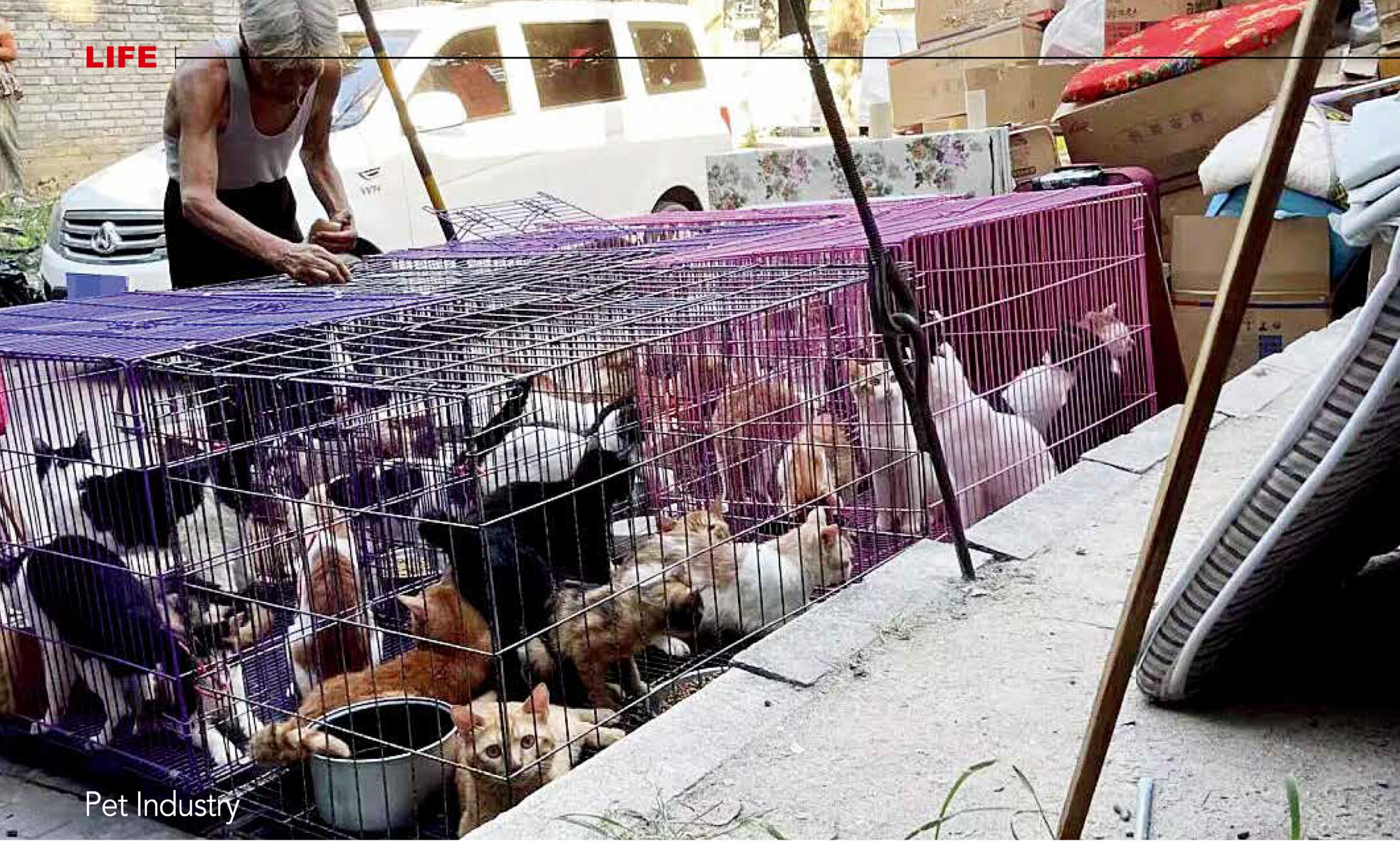
In this circumstance, Liu Shanhuai suggests exploring smaller classes to better allocate teaching resources and promote teaching quality. He told *ChinaReport* that China needs to further explore a mature mechanism that allows the reassignment and withdrawal of teachers to cope with the change. But he warned that since it involves the stability of the teaching workforce and the rights and interests of teachers, local governments should be very prudent in putting forward a withdrawal mechanism.

For example, teachers who fail performance evaluations, who want to quit altogether or violate professional ethics can be redirected through measures such as temporary leave, reassignment or dismissal.

In the summer holiday, Liu Min became a student again, studying high school maths, even asking high school students for advice to prepare for the new semester. "I'll try my best and be responsible for my students," she said.

Ma Xuelei noted that teacher reallocation will become normal and increase in the future. "When it comes down to it, teachers really need to rely on their abilities to guarantee their jobs, not on just being able to jump into a new public sector job," Ma said.★

Liu Xiaoan, Shen Na, Chen Yang, Liu Ran and Liu Min are pseudonyms



More than 40 cats are kept in one cage by a farmer who siphons off their blood to sell (Photo Courtesy of Interviewee)

Blood Money

Transfusions for beloved pets is a growing market, and many beyond veterinarians are looking to cash in. But with regulation lacking, insiders are far from sanguine about an industry putting the lives of animals and public health at risk

By Wang Shihan

The video opens with a skinny tabby cat struggling on the ground – its left front paw pierced by a large needle. But its attempt to escape is quickly thwarted by a man, who forces it back down onto a thin blue cloth and watches as its blood streams through a tube into a collection bag. Too weak to resist, the cat lets out a desperate cry.

This 56-second clip was posted on October 28 on major video platform Bilibili, with the caption "If you don't love them, please don't hurt them."

However, driven by sizeable profits of cat and dog blood transfusions for pets, demand has surged despite sources that may challenge ethics, if not laws.

Beyond legal and moral concerns, experts warn that unregulated blood collection and clinical use may not only fail to save sick pets, but could also pose public health risks through latent diseases.

Li Yu first learned about pet blood banks when her cat was diagnosed with feline panleukopenia, known as cat plague, at an international veterinary hospital. The vet told her that a blood transfusion was urgently needed.

Blood could be ordered from the blood bank and delivered the same day, the vet told her. However, because her cat had Type B, rarer than the more common Type A, the price was 100 yuan (US$14) per millilitre. That meant a single transfusion would cost Li 4,000 yuan (US$562).

Unable to afford the cost, Li declined the hospital's offer and turned instead to a friend, who happened to have two Type B cats.

Drawn out of Need

Blood transfusions as a medical option are no longer unfamiliar to pet owners. In Shanghai, Chen Xiao, a woman who runs a facility for rescued and ill cats, once paid for nine transfusions for a cat with anemia, feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV), mycoplasma infection and stomatitis. She continued the treatment until the cat died from irreversible organ failure.

"Because blood transfusions can be very effective and can sometimes save a life with just one treatment, it's hard for pet owners to give up trying," Chen told *ChinaReport*.

In 2024, there were 120 million pet dogs and cats in China, according to Sixiang Studio of Sohu.com. That same year, a Goldman Sachs report revealed that for the first time, China's pet population exceed the number of children under age 4, a gap expected to double by 2030.

With emotional attachments for their pets deepening, more Chinese owners are unwilling to give up hope when a life-saving treatment is available. That often means turning to blood transfusion.

Chen has visited many pet hospitals and joined online groups for owners whose pets suffer from severe illnesses. Among them, one owner paid for 21 blood transfusions for her cat with leukemia.

"In critical situations, a pet may need transfusions once or twice a week. In extreme cases, it can even be daily," Chen said.

But costs are often prohibitively high, and most pet owners cannot afford them. This has led people to seek out new sources.

Several years ago, Lin Kai watched helplessly as his Labrador passed away because he could not afford transfusions, which cost around 10,000 yuan (US$1,406) each.

To ease his sorrow, he started raising six greyhounds with universal blood types in Shandong Province, in order to provide more affordable blood to those in need.

"My 24-hour door-to-door service within a distance of 200 kilometres is 15 yuan (US$2.1) per millilitre," he told *ChinaReport,* half the price once charged for his Labrador. However, Lin insists he is not driven by profit and has declined collaboration offers from pet hospitals.

"I have never overdrawn blood. I feed my dogs chicken, which costs 4,000 to 5,000 yuan (US$562-703) a month. The fee only covers part of the expenses," he said, adding that each dog rests for two to six months after a draw of 300-400 millilitres.

But Lin said that humane suppliers are in the minority: "Many feed their dogs cheap food and draw their blood frequently. When the dogs grow too weak, they just sell them for slaughter and buy low-cost dogs to replace them."

Vampire Slayers

According to Cao Jinwei, secretary general of the Capital Animal Welfare Association (CAWA) in Beijing, volunteers from his organisation discovered an illicit facility crowded with more than 300 stray cats in 2018.

Among the cats, some of which were about to be sent to a slaughterhouse in South China, dozens had shaved legs and necks, signs of repeated blood collection.

"Hundreds of cats were locked in chicken coops, where leftover food and feces were mixed together. There were even newborn kittens among them. The odour was disgusting," Cao told *ChinaReport*. Through CAWA's persistent efforts, the facility was eventually shut down and all its cats were fostered.

Several years later, an animal rescue worker discovered an outdoor cage holding more than 40 emaciated and malnourished cats. She contacted CAWA for help. Among them, a calico was covered in needle marks, its mouth full of ulcers from excessive blood draws. The rescue worker adopted 11 of the cats herself. The rest were homed through CAWA's social media network.

According to the Bilibili video mentioned earlier, a single bag of cat blood can sell for as much as 800 yuan (US$113). "Pet blood banks should offer hope for saving animal lives, but all they've created are filthy, disgusting supply chains," the video creator commented.

In November 2024, the non-profit

Rescued cats that were once used for blood collection sit in a cage outside a house (Photo by CNS) organisation China Veterinary Medical Association issued a slate of industry guidelines. They set the minimum weight for donor cats at 4.5 kilograms and require a red blood cell volume of no lower than 35 percent. However, stray cats and dogs are rarely tested to see whether they meet these standards.

There are also serious concerns about the health of stray animals. According to Chen, infectious diseases like FIV, leukemia and parasitical diseases are common among the stray cats she has fostered. "These diseases can easily become fatal when activated," she said.

Cao added that in addition to basic blood typing and cross-matching, a complete blood panel, typically costing 100-200 yuan (US$14-28), is required before transfusions. These tests measure white blood cell and platelet counts, helping prevent infections.

"But when blood comes from unknown stray animals and the examinations are skipped, the medical risks increase dramatically," he told *ChinaReport*.

Ill Practices

Beyond the underground blood trade, pet hospitals are often equally unregulated.

An executive at a pet hospital in Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province requesting anonymity told *ChinaReport* that blood transfusion is a "sensitive" service in the industry. Hospitals generally prefer to use blood sourced by pet owners themselves. If owners cannot find a donor, doctors may help by posting requests online.

Blood from commercial banks is often considered a last resort. In such cases, hospitals typically receive two or three samples for testing. But protocols are not always followed.

Li Yu told *ChinaReport* that several hours after she had turned down the blood bank's offer due to cost, the hospital informed her that her cat's Type A blood had been misidentified as Type B.

"They didn't tell me until I had been waiting outside the facility for hours," Li said. "I was angry, but also exhausted. I didn't have the energy to argue with them."

Despite ongoing treatment, her cat's condition worsened and it died midway through a transfusion.

Li's experience is not unique. According to a report by Henan Media Group, a pet Devon Rex cat in Wuhan, Hubei Province died of complications from a mismatched transfusion at Kedao Pet Hospital, a local chain.

The veterinarian charged the cat's owner, surnamed Chen, 600 yuan (US$84) for the blood after confirming the cat's blood type as Type A.

When the cat's condition worsened, Chen brought her pet to another hospital, where its blood type was determined to be AB. The hospital suspected that the previous blood was likely Type B. A third blood test post mortem confirmed the error.

Some hospitals are directly involved in the illicit blood trade.

In August 2025, attorney Ouyang Di with Dewell and Partners Law Firm in Wuhan was offering free legal advice on her regular livestream when a veterinarian logged in.

The vet said his pet hospital had received stray dogs and cats from a "partner" and was using them as donors, sometimes excessively. He wanted to know whether this was legal.

According to Ouyang, pet hospitals that knowingly use blood from sources such as stray dogs and cats, by law must be penalised. If they also profit from illegal blood sales, they may also face criminal charges, the attorney added.

"But transactions, usually conducted in clandestine ways and without written contracts, are hard to trace," she said.

Even when evidence exists, punishments are often too lenient to be effective.

In 2023, an vet intern in Guangzhou exposed her pet hospital for illegally collecting blood from fostered dogs and cats. Backed by video footage and screenshots, including a single online transaction of 14,400 yuan (US$2,028), she reported the case to Guangdong TV.

The same year, the local agriculture and rural affairs bureau fined the hospital only 4,320 yuan (US$608) for using blood from unquarantined animals.

Sanguine Laws

"No standards exist to regulate pet blood collection, testing, storage and supply," Ouyang said. "And there are no substantive legal provisions to monitor essential operations such as blood bank management and donor treatment."

"This legal vacuum leads to lax enforcement and low-cost violations," she added.

Cao acknowledged that the industry has made incremental progress, with growing emphasis on blood sourcing and testing to curb illicit supplies. Awareness of legal blood sources has also improved among pet owners and the industry alike.

Speaking anonymously, an accredited veterinarian and large-dog breeder told *ChinaReport* that to ensure legal blood supplies, his company provides regular vaccinations, antibody screenings, routine blood work and serial-numbered blood bags.

However, he admitted that operations down the supply chain are neglected for now. "During transportation, delivery services treat pet blood no differently than fresh produce. Blood that isn't fresh is often incinerated," he said.

"If blood sources are unsafe, not only will the pet receiving the transfusion be at risk, it could also be a public health issue," Cao said.

"Without proper regulation of transport and disposal, contaminated blood could spread pathogens to the environment, raising the risk of zoonosis, which could increase the risk of the spread of diseases from animals to humans, and this poses an even greater danger," Cao warned.★

Trading Up

As more university graduates enrol in vocational schools to increase their practical skills in a competitive job market, experts call to rethink the educational divide to provide the employees of the future

By Xie Ying and Hu Kexin

Zibo Polytechnic University welcomes its first batch of freshmen after it was allowed to award bachelor's degrees, Zibo, Shandong Province, September 5, 2025 (Photo by VCG)

Wang Xiao had a strong feeling of "being closer to her career goals" when she went to a vocational school in Taiyuan, Shanxi Province in May 2025 and saw rows of busy machines for students to get hands-on training in the campus workshops.

"I've finally touched the real thing," she told *ChinaReport*.

In 2024, Wang graduated from a second-tier university, the middle rank in China's three-tier system of classifying universities, after majoring in environmental engineering. But her heart is pulling in another direction – electrical automation engineering, a career path she feels will benefit her more.

"I hope I can solve problems in life and support myself with [practical] skills," Wang said, explaining why she enrolled in the eight-month course.

Wang is not the only university graduate to opt for vocational school to learn new skills or update old ones, despite the previous stigma. Local governments have taken note, and many are offering support for students.

Zhejiang, Anhui and Shandong provinces are among those to offer backing for university graduates who want to upskill at vocational schools. In August 2025, Guangdong Province launched a pilot programme aimed at training high-skilled talents that offered one-year vocational courses to college graduates.

Sun Cheng, former director of Career and Continuous Education, China National Institute of Education Sciences, believes the trend is due to the higher demand for skilled professionals and people's change in the attitude towards which degrees are useful.

Job Opportunities

According to Sun Lei, who teaches electrical automation technology at Wang's school, they enrolled about 10 university graduates in 2023, but by 2025, there were more than 30. Most come from second- or third-tier universities. Sun said they are seeking more guaranteed employment opportunities and appreciate the quality of the courses the school offers.

Qingdao Technicians College, a public vocational school for training engineers in Shandong Province, launched courses for university graduates much earlier in 2009, and now they account for one-third of total students, media reported.

A 2024 survey by Zhaopin, a leading Chinese job portal, indicated that university graduates believe that acquiring more skills at vocational schools will help land a job, with 52.2 percent of respondents saying that the market needs more skilled professionals.

Students learn baking at a food and medical vocational school, Hohhot, Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, April 25, 2024 (Photo by VCG)

Another 43.2 percent believe that accruing one more skill means another pathway to a job.

Another 2024 Zhaopin survey on university graduate employment found that in 2024, the employment rate of Chinese university graduates was 45.4 percent, 2.1 percent down on 2023, and for those with university postgrad qualifications and PhD degrees, the employment rate was 44.4 percent, a 12.3 percent plunge from 2023.

Data from China's National Bureau of Statistics in August 2025, just after students graduated, the unemployment rate of young people (not including students) aged 16-24 hit 18.9 percent, the highest since December 2023, one year after China came out of its Covid restrictions.

Yet China suffers from a shortage of skilled workers. According to the most recent government data, by the end of 2025, China may lack 30 million skilled workers in key manufacturing industries, creating barriers to developing these sectors. In May 2024, a report by the China National Institute of Education Sciences warned that China's ratio of highly skilled labourers against the number of total labourers was still around 30 percent, lagging behind manufacturing powerhouses like Japan and Germany.

Drawing on media reports, *ChinaReport* found a greater tendency for graduates from lower-tier universities to enroll in vocational schools, particularly if their field of study is less likely to secure them a job after graduation. These include languages, arts, law and management studies, where there are too many graduates competing for fewer jobs, as well as pressure from emerging industries such as AI.

Lin Beilei who graduated from a private university in a small city in 2023, chose to continue her studies in the new field of electrical mining machinery at a local vocational school. "I majored in human resources, and it was hard to find a job," she told *ChinaReport*. "After I've studied two years at the vocational school, I should be able to get a stable job at a State-owned enterprise with full benefits," she said.

In the fall 2025 semester, Jia Rui, who graduated with a degree in Chinese language and literature from Yangzhou University in Jiangsu Province, started a course at a vocational school in Shanxi Province in computer numerical control (CNC) lathe machines, which includes learning how to operate and programme complex automated machine tools. She told *ChinaReport* that she had wanted to study for a master's degree, but decided that a shift towards manufacturing engineering would be better. Some of her relatives work in this new field, she said.

"As a liberal arts graduate, I knew nothing about CNC lathes, so I went to the vocational school to get training," she said.

Yang Meng, who studied law at a university in Sichuan Province and later worked for customer service at a bank in Shanghai, has decided to "make a change in her life" by studying to become a baker. She told *ChinaReport* that while many people think a banking job is "super good," she found it boring and hated it.

"Every day at the bank, I wanted to quit," she said. "But I'm happy to learn baking. I might work at a bakery in the future. I can try my hand at lots of things while I'm still young," she added.

Building on Skills

Most grads who go on to vocational schools hope to build on what they already studied with more practical experience. An October 2025 survey of 144 enterprises by Qingdao Technicians College found that nearly 50 percent of the companies complained that only around half of their employees have both high-level qualifications and good practical skills, and nearly 80 percent of the companies said they support university graduates to improve their practical skills, financial news portal Yicai reported.

A cross-border e-commerce enterprise told Yicai that to go along with the national policy to upgrade industries, enterprises are in urgent need of what they call "compound talents" – employees who have both solid theoretical knowledge and outstanding practical skills. What is needed is an "ability upgrade," observers said.

For years, Chinese colleges have been blamed for lagging far behind the times, with an outdated and oversized emphasis on classroom-based theoretical learning that ignores real practice. In August 2025, Zheng Qinghua, an engineering professor at Tongji University in Shanghai, wrote in an article in Party newspaper *Study Times* that more than 80 percent of degree courses in Chinese universities are products of the previous three industrial revolutions. Viewed through a current lens, these are obsolete and do not meet labour market needs. In particular, engineering has valued classroom knowledge, which makes it hard for graduates to be the "compound talents" that businesses need, he wrote.

Graduates themselves agree. A 2023 survey by education industry analyst MyCOS, found that 59 percent of university graduates said they did not spend enough time interning and doing practical skills, and 36 percent said they felt what they studied was out of date.

Experts believe that vocational schools are well placed to react to what emerging firms need by filling the gaps left by university education.

All interviewees who studied at vocational schools told *ChinaReport* there is an emphasis on acquiring practical skills in their courses. Yang Meng said she bakes every day, and Jia Rui did hands-on practice every day.

Sun Lei also told *ChinaReport* that the eight-month courses at his school targeted specifically at university grads are mostly practical. They buy real components and provide scenarios students could encounter at real industrial sites for students to design solutions. The school also assists with exams for professional qualifications.

Zhang Aibing, who teaches CNC machining at Jia Rui's school, told *ChinaReport* that university grads find practical skills hard compared to other students in his class, so now they have tailored classes to them, even at the individual level. Around 80 percent of the course is practical.

More than 90 percent of graduates taking courses at Zhang's school to build on their university major have found jobs linked to their new skills. Students are impressed with the emphasis on practical teaching compared to how they studied at university.

"Even if the courses have the same name, majors in vocational schools and universities have different focuses. We can say that vocational schools are like 'the last mile' to real application in industries," said Kuang Ying, a professor in vocational and adult education at East China Normal University in Shanghai. "You need to combine the theoretical knowledge studied at university with the problem-solving needed by modern enterprises, and that's what [companies] need today," she told *ChinaReport*.

Attitude Shift

According to Kuang, even while net university enrollment is rising due to government encouragement, an attitude shift means that not everyone believes this is the only way to rise to the top in a career. Vocational schools, which have direct connections to companies, are becoming more attractive.

A recent report by *China Labour and Social Security News*, a paper under the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security, commented that society is shifting from "academic degree worship" to "ability worship" and that "compound talents" are the most valuable resource in the new era.

But stigma persists. Interviewees like Wang Xiao and Yang Meng said they hesitated to study at a vocational school as society perceives them as inferior. Entry to a vocational school requires a much lower mark in the *gaokao*, the national college entrance exams students take at the end of high school.

Lan Yue graduated from a second-tier university in Jiangxi Province and started working in e-commerce. She chose to go to Sweden to study data analysis at a vocational school in 2023 because she found people abroad are more respectful and supportive of career choices. "My landlord told me one of his friends in his 50s was also planning to study at a vocational school. It's very common there," she said.

Kuang stresses she does not encourage high school students to just abandon university study and shift to vocational education, but she hopes students will think more about what the labour market wants and what suits them. "It's more important that students plan their careers earlier, rather than having to study again after they graduate," Kuang said. "We should think about these new trends and adjust our training schemes sooner rather than later," she added.

The *China Labour and Social Security News* article calls for policy and social support to train "compound talents." Some action has been taken, such as local government support to retrain, strengthening links between industry and educational establishments, financial assistance to encourage emerging fields of study, and adjusting what kind of courses universities offer.

Meanwhile, the government is trying hard to break the educational snobbery. China's new Vocational Education Law effective in May 2022 has allowed vocational high school graduates a pathway to get a bachelor's degree with further study, and encourage universities to offer vocational majors. Some cities like Shanghai also allow students to swap university midway for a vocational college. Besides, universities are trying to define themselves more clearly, either to focus on academic or applied research.

These measures are expected to give students more courage to find what course and educational institution suits them best.

"This trend to study at vocational schools should be regarded as a shift in people's attitude towards 'degree-worship' in education," Sun Lei said.

"In the future, vocational education should be flexible, supporting short courses that even working people can access easily to improve their skills or gain professional qualifications. This has been happening for many years across Europe," Kuang said.★

Wang Xiao, Lin Beilei, Jia Rui, Yang Meng and Lan Yue are pseudonyms

New Energy Vehicles

No Quick Fixes

NEV manufacturers' tight grip on maintenance and spare parts is hindering the aftersales market, which will hurt the sector in the long run, experts say

By Chen Weishan and Xu Ming

A Tesla maintenance technician connects to a vehicle with a laptop to service it, Ningbo, Zhejiang Province, June 11, 2015
(Photo by VCG)

In September 2025, auto repair influencer Brother Long revealed that he was ordered to pay 100,000 yuan (US$14,052) to electric vehicle maker XPeng, who had sued him for spreading false statements and defaming XPeng's products. Three other automakers, including conglomerate BYD, had also previously taken him to court for posting videos in which he commented on problems relating to repairing their vehicles. He told media he had to pay a combined 7 million yuan (US$983,647).

BYD announced in October 2024 it was suing Brother Long for publishing false statements, spreading rumours and defaming its products in his videos. But some netizens believe it is because his videos, in which he analyzes the problems of new energy vehicles (NEVs) and offers cheaper solutions, have stepped on the toes of automakers. The case once again stirred discussion over the prolonged vexation of NEV maintenance in China.

In 2024, there were 31.4 million registered NEVs nationwide, and by October 2025, sales surpassed those of fuel-powered vehicles for the first time. Despite this, customers complain the repair market for NEVs is afflicted with high costs and long waits as owners are often forced by warranty agreements to only use auto shops affiliated with NEV brands.

Meanwhile, independent auto shops that offer more competitive prices are shut out of the repair business. Repairing NEVs involves not only specialised technologies but also data supervision from automakers. Since NEVs are connected to the internet, modifying the data of core components such as batteries is considered illegal if vehicles are under warranty.

In late 2024, two Shanghai auto mechanics, "Big Liu" and "Little Liu" were convicted of "damaging computer information systems" after using specialised tools to unlock NEV battery packs, bypassing the manufacturer's official procedures. The owners wanted to fix their vehicles more quickly and at lower cost. Their unauthorised modification of battery management data compromised its accuracy. Both received six-month suspended sentences.

The case mirrors the multiple maintenance dilemmas for NEV owners. It involves the interests of automakers, consumers and repair companies – but in a David and Goliath situation, big automakers retain dominance as their control of core technical data and proprietary parts, ensuring non-affiliated maintenance options are limited.

Since 2016, China has implemented a warranty policy of eight years or 120,000 kilometres for core components of NEVs. By 2024, the first batch of NEV core components were no longer under warranty, which means as the market continues to expand, aftersales protocols urgently need adjusting to better support NEV development in the future, interviewed analysts said.

Repair Monopoly

"The [Shanghai] case stirred fierce discussion among repair companies," said Cao Xuejun, vice president of Jingyou Technology, a claims assessment and settlement platform. He said it is a typical instance involving NEV repair in that the "automakers need to protect their vehicle data, as regulated, but it clashes with consumers' interests."

Li Ming, a third-party auto shop owner in Beijing, told *ChinaReport* that his company has repaired some NEVs. But the legal precedent in Shanghai's Jiading District made him realise the potential consequences of "unauthorised unlocking."

Ensuring the authenticity of collected data is mandatory for regulatory authorities. In March 2022, the regulatory

Student mechanics are taught how to inspect and maintain new energy vehicles at Wuhu Mechanical Engineering School, Wuhu, Anhui Province, September 2025 (Photo by VCG)

body of industry and information technology, public security, transport and other agencies issued a guideline on strengthening safety systems of NEV enterprises, demanding continuous monitoring of the operational safety status of sold NEVs and requiring the uploading of monitoring data in accordance with standards, guaranteeing the timeliness, authenticity and validity of submitted data.

The regulation raised concerns that only channels authorised by automakers have the right to unlock batteries if a collision leads to battery locking, a safety feature installed in NEVs to prevent fires and electric shocks in high-voltage systems.

Cao Xuejun said that since fuel vehicles are primarily mechanical, it is hard for manufacturers to restrict where they are repaired. However, NEVs require connection to the manufacturer's systems, which allows them to remotely lock vehicles.

Locking battery packs is just one of the issues causing friction between automakers and third-party repairers. NEV manufacturers have long been blamed for dominating the maintenance market. They use encryption technologies, data access restrictions and warranty clauses to ensure retention of maintenance rights over the core electrical systems within authorised channels.

Some NEV repairs may involve modifications to software systems that could compromise driving safety and which are viewed as an infringement of automakers' intellectual property rights. NEV manufacturers are reluctant to share the rights to repair the three core electrical systems – the power battery, drive motor and electronic control system – the most lucrative NEV components.

"Automakers may authorise unaffiliated auto shops to undertake bodywork and painting, but they'll never let outsiders touch core electrical systems," Song Quanye, an automotive aftermarket expert, told *ChinaReport*.

Locked-in Warranties

NEV companies usually stipulate in their purchase agreements that repairs must be conducted through certified channels or owners risk voiding the vehicle's warranty. This allows automakers to keep NEVs still under warranty inside the manufacturer-established maintenance ecosystem.

AITO, a brand of electric vehicles under the Seres Group that incorporates Huawei technology, requires that repairs involving Huawei's DriveONE electric drive system or in-vehicle systems be performed by Huawei-certified engineers or no warranty will be provided. Similarly, BYD's lifetime warranty for the three core electric systems states that it will be invalidated if the owner "fails to perform maintenance at a BYD-authorised service centre" or "uses non-genuine BYD parts for maintenance or repairs."

This limits the options for consumers, many of whom complain of the high costs of using an authorised "4S" dealership. These are one-stop full-service shops for drivers in China, providing four services – sales, service, spare parts and surveys (feedback to automakers).

An NEV owner from Chongqing told local media he had to pay 1,300 yuan (US$183) to get an oil and filter change at an official 4S dealer, double the price of a regular garage.

"If I don't get work done at an authorised 4S dealer, my warranty will be cancelled. I just have to put up with the price," the owner told newspaper the *Chongqing Legal System* in July 2025.

Adding to the issues owners face, the NEV spare parts market is highly restricted. Manufacturer constraints on supply channels usually result in high prices for parts.

"If the market size for a particular model is small, third-party manufacturers are reluctant to produce components for it," an employee at a car components manufacturer told *ChinaReport* on condition of anonymity. "For fuel vehicles, there are usually genuine parts made by official equipment manufacturers (OEMs) and secondary market parts, which helps reduce maintenance costs to some extent. However, if an NEV model sells only tens of thousands of units, secondary manufacturers naturally lack the incentive to produce compatible parts."

Brake on Aftersales

Another bottleneck is the insufficient number of authorised repair shops, also a constraint on competition. Li Ming said the process is hard. He tried to get authorisation from several automakers three years ago, but found that even brands that only authorise third-party body work and paint jobs require applicants to operate more than one 4S shop, preferably representing luxury auto brands.

The high threshold not only keeps maintenance costs high but also significantly increases the difficulty and risks associated with repairs, interviewed experts noted.

Li once helped an NEV owner whose car, with a rated range of 400 kilometres, could only travel 70-80 kilometres on a single charge. Since the car had been driven over 300,000 kilometres in four years, it no longer met the warranty conditions. But the official repair shop's solution of replacing the entire battery pack would cost him more than 80,000 yuan (US$11,248). In the end, Li only replaced the damaged battery cell, reducing the cost to around 2,000 yuan (US$281).

Tang Yifan, an NEV owner living in Chongqing, told local media that in the city centre, there is only one authorised maintenance centre for the brand he purchased. It takes a long time to get service there. "Once it took more than two weeks to get it fixed," Tang told the *Chongqing Legal System* in July.

Song Quanye argues that automakers' restrictions on unauthorised repairs prevents a virtuous cycle in third-party NEV maintenance from forming. A lack of service centres capable of repairing NEVs is just one consequence.

"Currently, it's hard to find third-party repair shops specialising in NEVs. Only Tesla-related business is viable," Song said.

He noted that many third-party NEV repair shops have emerged this year, primarily repairing Tesla vehicles. This is because the first batch of domestically produced Model 3 and Model Y cars are just out of warranty. Tesla's popularity is also sufficient to sustain these repair shops' business. In contrast, most vehicles from domestic automakers are still within warranty. Some, like BYD, even offer lifetime warranties.

Technical Roadblocks

For third-party auto shops, the challenge is not only lack of authorisation, but also technical barriers. "Even with a new [combustion] engine model, mechanics can disassemble and reassemble it with 100 percent restoration. There are virtually no technical barriers to repairing fuel vehicles," Song said. "But when it comes to NEVs, especially the three electrical systems, many mechanics won't touch them."

Core battery technologies remain proprietary, and the high-voltage electrical systems in NEV batteries pose significant risks. If a mechanic makes even a slight error, it could result in a severe electric shock.

For example, according to new NEV maintenance standards rolled out in Shenzhen, Guangdong Province, in January 2025, businesses must possess both operational qualifications and certified technicians. Mechanics must obtain certification from an authorised institution or complete training provided by manufacturers, and have a low-voltage electrician licence.

The manager of an auto repair shop in Chongqing told the *Chongqing Legal System* that among the eight technicians at his shop, only one holds an electrician's licence. With no authorisation from NEV manufacturers, the shop has to limit its services to basic tasks such as tire changes, exterior modifications, paint and body repairs.

Another auto repair shop owner from Chongqing, Liu Qingping, said that less than 10 percent of vehicles they repair are NEVs. "We hope to expand our NEV business, but vehicle owners won't let us touch core components, and we're not trained to do it either," Liu said.

According to the China Automotive Maintenance and Repair Trade Association, there are around 400,000 enterprises related to fuel vehicle maintenance and repair, but only 20,000-30,000 for NEVs. There are fewer than 100,000 NEV mechanics nationwide.

"Training NEV mechanics takes a long time, and there aren't many college courses," Zhang Xiang, a research fellow at the Automotive Industry Innovation Research Centre at North China University of Technology based in Beijing, was quoted as saying in an article published on cctv.cn in November 2025.

It seems counterintuitive that while owners complain of long waits and poor service, mechanics do not have enough NEVs to learn on.

"Automotive repair requires training and extensive hands-on experience. However, the current market lacks enough NEVs for repair. Without enough vehicles to practise on, the skills they learn will be obsolete within a year or two," aftermarket expert Song said.

Wang Hao, founder of Kebola, an automotive consulting firm based in Qingdao, Shandong Province, has noticed the mismatch between demand and supply in the aftersales market for NEVs. He told *ChinaReport* that NEV manufacturers and core parts suppliers have been relatively slow in promoting technological transparency and circulation of spare parts, creating de facto monopolies and barriers to fair service, which has prevented the development of the NEV service aftermarket from meeting demand.

In 2015, transportation and commerce authorities ordered automakers to disclose technical maintenance and repair information for all vehicles sold to all service centres and buyers.

But in reality, Cao Xuejun said that despite the requirements, problems persist, including slow updates of technical maintenance information and cumbersome procedures for third-party repairers to get data from manufacturers.

As 10 years have passed, the measures on technical information disclosure should be revised, interviewed experts said. When it comes to NEVs, government agencies should provide guidance on how much third-party repair shops should pay to access the technical information necessary for repairs, and punish companies that refuse to disclose this information.

In January 2025, authorities issued guidelines on NEV insurance, which called on enterprises to lower the cost of NEV repairs by enriching supply channels and varieties of NEV parts, and to encourage NEV and battery enterprises to support sales of spare parts for the three core electrical systems.

Wang Ligang, an expert in NEV after-sales, noted in an interview with *China Automotive News* in May 2025 that the opening up of the aftermarket for fuel vehicles had also relied on laws and regulations to push manufacturers to give access to spare parts, repair information and service channels.

But he added that besides the willingness and attitude of automakers, pressure over profits and the competence of third-party repair shops are obstacles to an open market. "As NEV ownership increases and manufacturers' profitability pressure eases, they'll have no option but to open up the spare parts market, repair information and service channels," Wang said.★

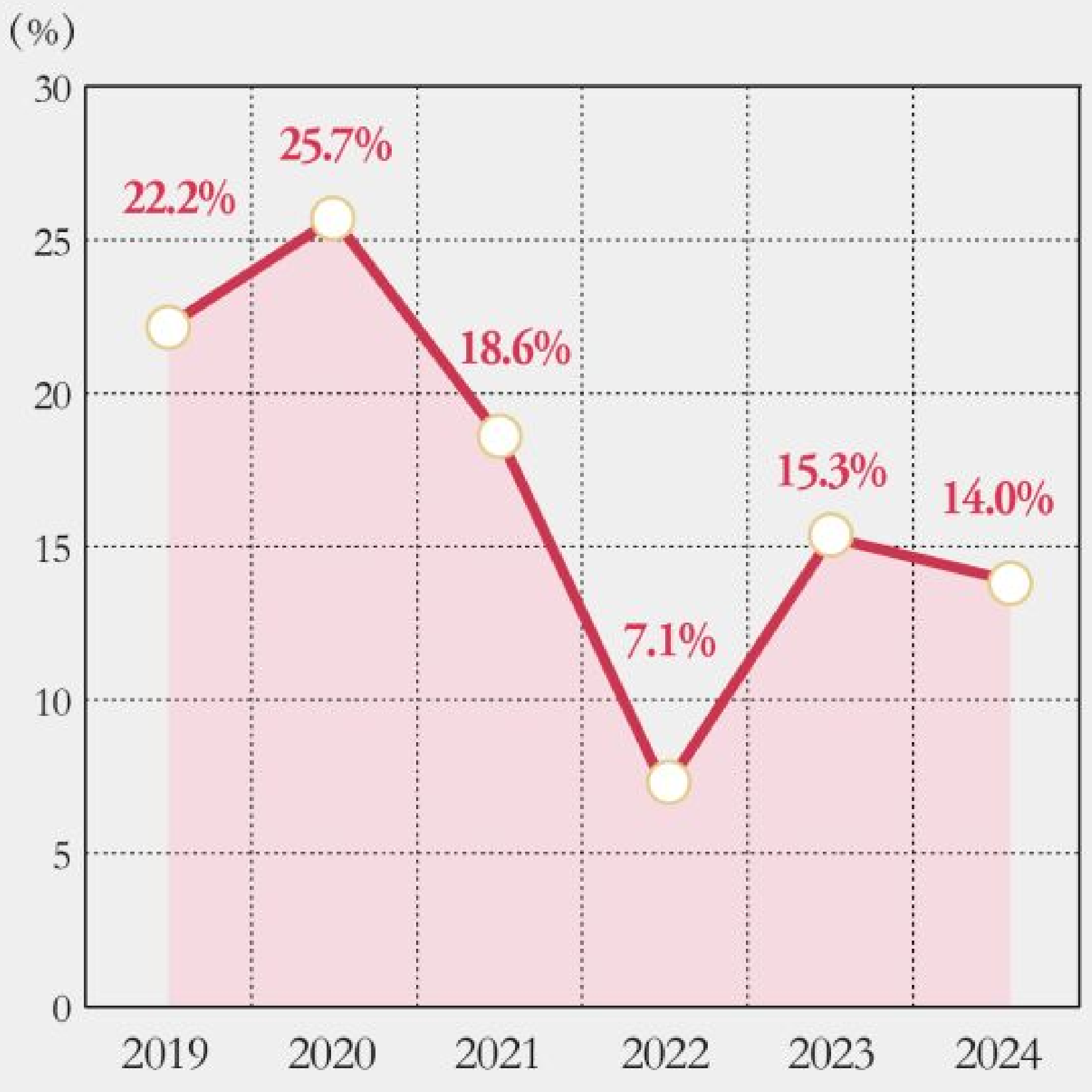
China By Numbers

10.3 percent

Year-on-year growth in China's cross-border e-commerce imports and exports in the first half of 2025, totalling 1.37 trillion yuan (US$193.98b)

Source: General Administration of Customs of China

Year-on-year change in China's cross-border e-commerce imports and exports between 2018 and 2024

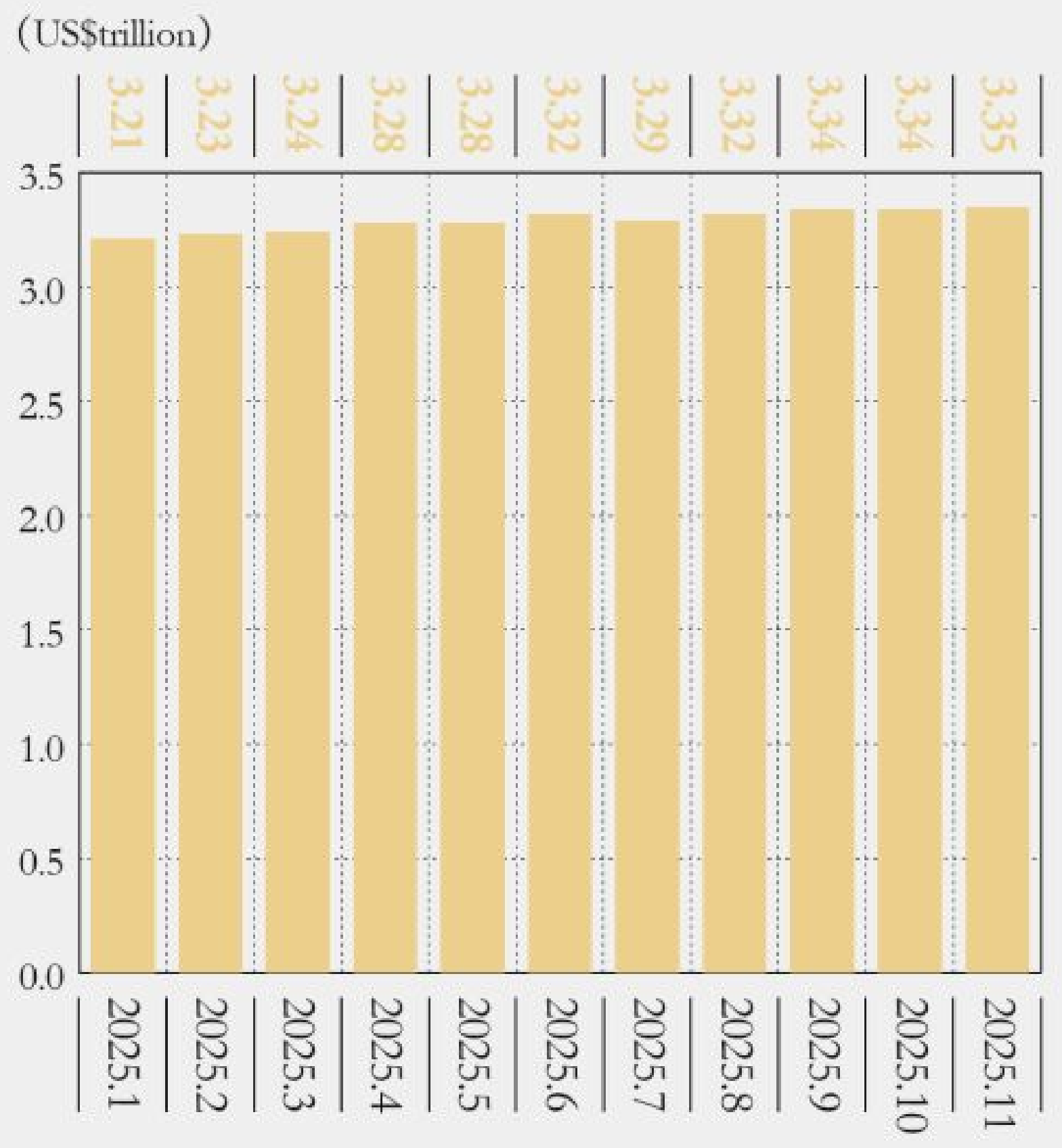


US$3.35 trillion

The scale of China's foreign exchange reserve by the end of November 2025, a new high since December 2015

Source: State Administration of Foreign Exchange

China's foreign exchange reserve between January and November 2025



1.9 percent

Year-on-year growth in the revenue of light industrial enterprises above designated size (with annual main business revenue surpassing US$2.8 million) in the first 10 months of 2025, totalling 19 trillion yuan (US$2.7t)

Source: China National Light Industry Council

21.2%

Year-on-year rise in the number of sold passenger vehicles equipped with Level-2 driving-assistance functions in the first three quarters of 2025, achieving a penetration rate of 64 percent

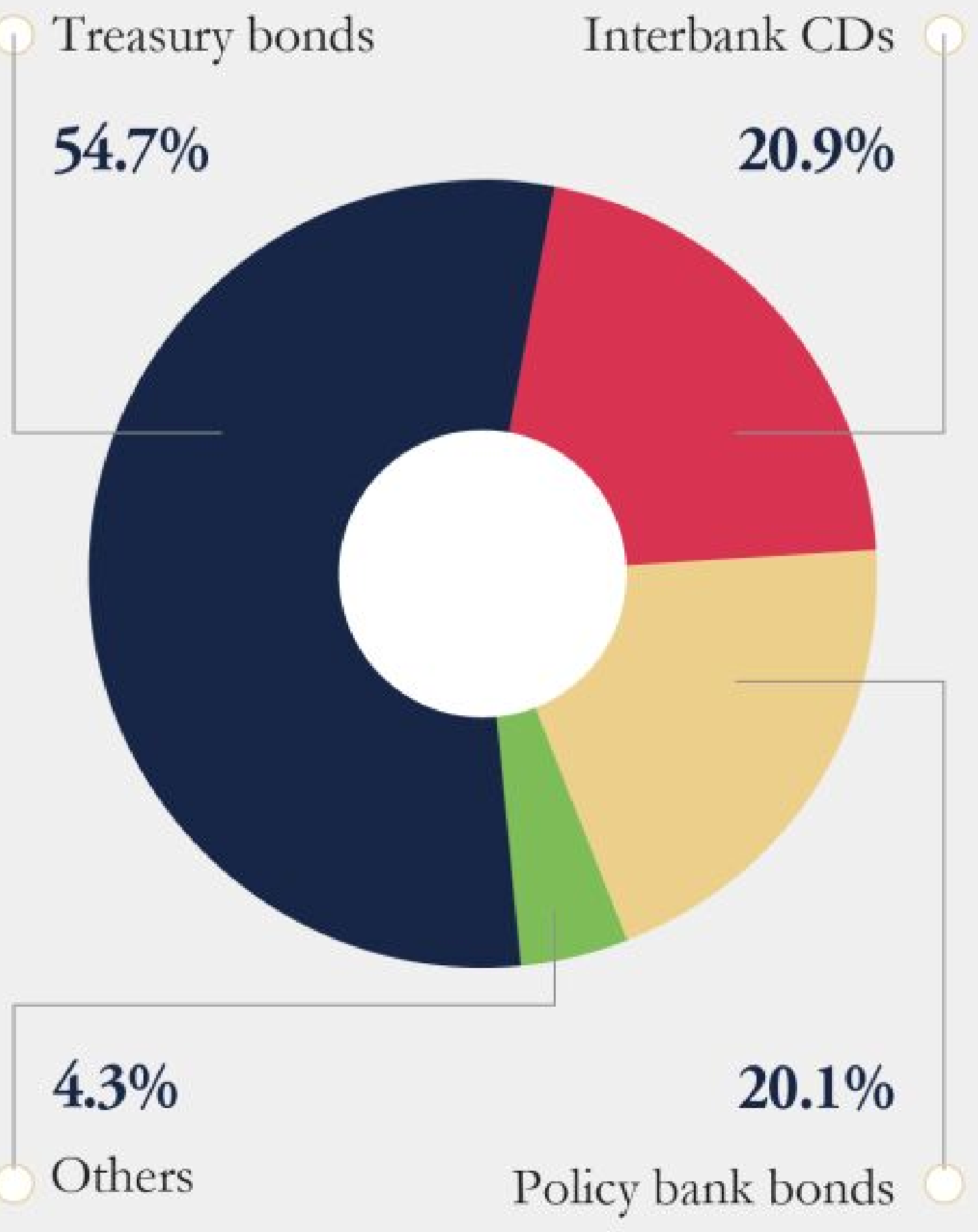
Source: Ministry of Industry and Information Technology of China

US$538 billion

The amount of outstanding bonds in custody held by overseas institutions in China's bond market by the end of October 2025, accounting for 1.9 percent of the total

Source: The People's Bank of China

Types of outstanding bonds in custody held by overseas institutions in China's interbank bond market as of the end of October 2025



Pop Music

On the Record

For 51-year-old Taiwanese rock and hip-hop icon Chang Chen-yue, music is where storytelling and social issues meet – as long as he doesn't become just another 'preachy old guy'

By Qiu Guangyu

Time seems to have left few traces on Chang Chen-yue. During our interview, the 51-year-old musician, affectionately known by fans as A-Yue, was sporting his low-key style: backward cap, unshaven whiskers, white shirt and Hawaiian shorts.

But 2025 has been anything but chill for Chang. Ending a 12-year hiatus, he released his 10th studio album called *Follow the Flow* followed by a tour in major cities across the Chinese Mainland starting in October in Beijing, followed by Shanghai, Wuhan and Chengdu. It will take him to more cities until June 2026.

On September 25 this year, Chang also appeared at The Next Big Thing ACE Music Festival in Shanghai, his first DJ performance in the mainland. He has long made it a habit to spend one night each month DJing at bars in Taipei, where he performs as DJ Orange. "It's fun, and I can earn a little cash," he said.

Since his 1993 debut album *I Just Like You,* he has created a distinctive musical style that blends rock, pop, folk, electronic, jazz and hip-hop, all with story-driven songwriting and a free-spirited, rebellious voice that never seems to age.

Songs and Spotlights

Few in the Mandopop scene are as private as Chang Chen-yue. "He's very rare," said Taiwanese music producer Jeff Chia Min-Su, who has worked with Chang for years. "I've known many artists, but no one else in the industry loves life and dislikes work as much as he does."

Chang has written numerous Chinese-language hits over the past three decades, including "Goodbye," "Xiao Yu" and "Love Me, Don't Go."

Despite his success, he remains a reserved, low-profile artist, intentionally distant from the spotlight. Many listeners do not know what he looks like.

But Chang is perfectly happy with this kind of anonymity. He recalled a story: During a concert on the mainland years ago, his bassist Tony Wong happened to look just like him, sporting his signature glasses, cap and whiskers.

"After the show, some fans mistook Tony for me and had him sign my albums. It was hilarious," Chang said, laughing.

In 2013, Chang won Best Mandarin Album at the 25th Golden Melody Awards, one of the most prestigious honours in Mandopop. Chang is of Amis heritage, a group indigenous to Taiwan, and the winning album's title, *I Am Ayal Komod,* proudly proclaims his Amis name.

But he did not release another album for 12 years, instead focusing on his private life. He married an Amis woman, Sawu Koyouan, in 2019, and they had their second child this year.

Despite his age, his spirit remains youthful. Chang spends most of his free time surfing, camping, skateboarding, cycling, hiking and hanging out in bars with younger friends.

"Even though I'm in my 50s, I want to stay mentally young," Chang told *ChinaReport*. "When you talk with young people about their thoughts and feelings, you shouldn't be the 'old guy.' When I was young, I hated those preachy old guys. I still don't want to become one."

Since 2014, Chang has taken an unconventional, casual approach to publishing. Under the name "The Underground Boss Ayal Komod," he began uploading demos to StreetVoice, an independent music-sharing platform. He has shared 23 songs there, inviting open listening and discussion among music fans.

"I love sharing music this way. Not as idol and fans, but as equal, music-loving friends online," he said.

Many of these deeply personal demos are as polished as studio tracks. On Sina Weibo in April 2024, pop music critic Er Di wrote: "Many of Chang's demos have great melodies, heartfelt emotions and thoughtful reflections on life."

Er highlighted the 2021 demo track "Moving House," which explores the emotional struggle of deciding what to keep or discard while moving, a metaphor for choices in life and love.

He added, "Songwriting is a natural talent. Some artists work strenuously using all kinds of elements, yet their songs sound mediocre. But Chang writes freely and loosely, and even his demos impress. He's a naturally gifted songwriter."

In July 2025, Chang released album *Follow the Flow*, featuring 10 songs inspired by his life, including the polished version of "Moving House," a heartfelt tribute to his late mother in "Mum's Eyes" and his love of surfing in "The Surfer."

Sounds and Stories

Born in a small fishing village in Hualien in 1974, Chang developed a love for music early on, singing in a church choir as a child. He began playing guitar in middle school and soon became passionate about Western rock music, especially hard rock and heavy metal.

In 1993, at just 19, he released his debut album *I Just Like You*. But it was his third album, *This Afternoon is Very Boring* (1997), released under Magic Stone, that catapulted him to fame. The album's 11 grunge-rock tracks, written entirely by Chang, stunned the industry and audiences with its raw rebelliousness, honesty and emotional power.

Many of the songs were inspired by his time working at a musical instrument shop in Kaohsiung. Through frank lyrics and catchy melodies, he vividly captured the struggles young people face: poverty, confusion about the future, longing for love, heartbreak and hope.

A hallmark of Chang's music is its storytelling quality, as if he is speaking directly through song. He often creates contrast by pairing cheerful, upbeat melodies with lyrics that are reflective, sorrowful or critical.

In his 1997 hit "Love's First Taste," he wrote: "If you're really going to leave me, give me back my photo. You don't need it anymore. I'll give it to my mum. […] I want to buy some alcohol to ease my sadness, but I'm too lazy to go out. I want to buy a pack of Longevity cigarettes, but I realise I'm not 18 yet. Is my 18-year-old self-destined to cry for love?"

These lines, which so sharply capture the voice of a rebellious teenage boy, struck listeners as refreshing and authentic. The song became a major hit and remains a Mandopop classic.

In his latest album *Follow the Flow*, Chang's songwriting remains rooted in honest observation and vivid everyday detail. On "What a Terrible Party," he sings: "What terrible pick-up lines and jokes. Let's sneak out and grab some drinks at the convenience store next door."

"I'm good at expressing things that way," Chang told *ChinaReport*. "People

Top: Chang Chen-yue performs at a concert in Guangzhou, Guangdong Province, November 30, 2013 (Photo by VCG)

Above: Chang Chen-yue performs at a shopping mall event, Chengdu, Sichuan Province, September 25, 2016 (Photo by VCG) say my lyrics are direct and simple, and that it's easy to make music videos because the lyrics already paint such clear scenes. That's how I write. I picture the exact elements in my head: people, objects, time, place, and then write them down."

Chang often remembers precisely the emotions surrounding a song's creation. Years ago, when producer Will Lin asked him to write a song for singer Faith Yang, Chang recalled sitting in his top-floor flat during a scorching summer. He had a bass guitar and a sampler beside him. Knowing that Lin and Yang, who were a couple, often quarreled and were close to breaking up, he poured his observations and empathy into writing "I Give You Love," a 1999 pop ballad expressing love from a woman's perspective.

In 1998, he wrote "Freedom for Malaysian singer Angelica Lee," inspired by her independence and determination to pursue her music dreams after moving to Taiwan from Malaysia at age 20.

According to producer Jeff Chia Min-Su, many female artists at Taiwanese legacy labels such as Rock Records and Magic Stone had distinct personalities, and needed songs tailored to their individuality, not generic, bland material. Chang, he said, was uniquely capable of writing songs that capture true feelings.

"I've known so many musicians," Chia said, "but it's rare to find someone like Chang who expresses his feelings so freely, thoroughly and authentically in just one song. It's incredible."

New Connections

Among Mandopop artists, Chang is one of the few who frequently writes about social issues. He said his awareness of injustice was first shaped by his father, a police officer. Watching TV news, his father often became angry about inequality and unfairness. In his song "Follow the Flow," Chang wrote: "Turn off the television. The TV channel made me angry, but why are my eyes glued to it?"

These feelings often inspire his songwriting. His 1998 funk track "I Want Money" takes the perspective of a young man shamelessly asking his parents for money to pursue a woman, a critique of materialism, consumerism and NEET culture (people who are not working or in school, and do not want a job).

In the 2013 song "Go a Little Slower," he depicts widening wealth gaps in what Japanese economist Kenichi Ohmae called an "M-shaped society," where the middle class is hollowed out. Chang wrote: "Celebrities drive luxury cars to date girls. Rich guys are gods. No one buys magnolias or cares about the poor old man selling them by the road. Scholars say, 'It's an M-shaped society.'"

Jeff Chia told *ChinaReport* that Chang is deeply empathetic and caring, which drives his interest in writing about broader social issues.

"He has strong compassion," Chia said, "so his songs often reflect humanity and social conscience."

Beyond his well-known hits, many of his older, lesser-known songs have resurfaced and gone viral again over the years. In March 2025, Chang posted a short video singing his 2011 song "Empty Handed," which portrays a young man frustrated by poverty and too insecure to pursue love. He sings: "I'm so poor and always working odd jobs. Who wouldn't hope to relax in an air-conditioned office?"

That summer, his 2016 song "Lost in Connection" suddenly gained renewed popularity on social media. A video he posted on Douyin in July has 1.42 million likes.

"I think many songs I wrote in the past already touched on the anxieties and struggles young people are facing today," he said.

Even though Chang uses songwriting to reflect on social issues and common struggles, he does not want his music to be too melancholy. Instead, he hopes to deliver warmth, optimism and joy.

"I hope people enjoy my concerts," he said. "I hope my music brings warmth and good memories, that they go home feeling happy. That's all I want."★

Chang Chen-yue (second from left) with other members of Super Band during a concert launch event in Beijing, March 11, 2009 (Photo by VCG)

Textile Merchandising Conference

Keqiao: A Showcase of Emerging Global Textile Trends

By Zhang Yicong

2025 Keqiao Fashion Week (Autumn) opens, Keqiao, Shaoxing, Zhejiang Province, November 5
(Photo by Wang Gang)

On Nov 6, 2025, the 8th World Textile Merchandising Conference took place in Keqiao, Shaoxing, also known as China's "International Textile Capital." How has this textile-based city drawn participants from over 60 countries to gather under the theme "International Co-opetition: Reshaping the Global Textile Value Chain" and explore industry development trends?

On the conference eve, Jason Wu, New York-based Chinese American designer and founder of the JASON WU brand, showcased over 50 looks at 2025 Keqiao Fashion Week (Autumn), presenting a stunning show blending "textile as foundation, fashion as expression." This was Wu's first China fashion show. He carefully chose Chinese-element-rich silk as his main material, reflecting his foresight on global fashion trends. "Chinese fabrics and Eastern aesthetics" will open a new "Silk Road in fashion," he said.

Globally, creative fatigue in fashion design is a common challenge, but the textile-fashion convergence offers a promising solution. During the conference, Patricia Lerat, founder of the French Federation of Haute Couture and Fashion, remarked: "We hope global textile industries will set up international cooperative innovation labs. Exchange and collaboration can inspire design creativity and explore a global market for cross-industry brand IP."

A technological revolution is unfolding in the textile industry worldwide. Take Shaoxing: It now has 12 national-level smart textile factories. After digital and intelligent transformation, local firms saw a 32.2 percent average rise in production efficiency and an 18 percent cut in costs, with continuous innovation fuelling the sector's high-quality development.

However, transformation trajectories vary by region. CHT Group Asia-Pacific Operations Director Alan Foster noted that for Germany's textile industry, setting global green manufacturing standards via dialogue is both the start of a new tech revolution and a path to international cooperation and consensus.

Today, the global textile industry advances only by integrating into the global market. Competitive-cooperative symbiosis is inevitable, and China's textile high-quality development brings global value opportunities. In Keqiao, China Textile City Group integrated five digital application scenarios – dyeing-printing smart systems, logistics and warehousing – to build the "China Textile City Brain." It also launched the "Cloud-Linked Fabrics, Digital New Silk Road" overseas trade alliance, creating an "online sampling + offline inspection + online ordering closed loop" connecting over 200 enterprises in more than 20 countries.

Standing at the industry's past-future intersection, the conference covered tech-driven innovation, cultural leadership, green transformation and open cooperation. It attracted global industry figures to explore turning competitive pressures into cooperation momentum and building a shared value community via integrated development.

During the conference, parallel events included the Entrepreneurs' Roundtable, the "Silk Road Keqiao · Fabrics to the World" International Buyers' Matchmaking Session, and the 2025 WGSN Future of Fashion Conference. Meanwhile, 2025 Keqiao Fashion Week (Autumn) and the 27th China Shaoxing Keqiao International Textile Expo (Autumn) opened in succession.

China National Textile and Apparel Council President Sun Ruizhe said: "China's textile practices offer valuable insights globally." He noted the industry will advance integrated development via tech innovation by deepening digital and real economy integration, promoting AI+, empowering global textile expansion through culture, and emphasizing low-carbon transformation for coordinated carbon reduction, pollution control, ecological restoration and green growth.★

Cartoon knight images are displayed outside Nanjing City Wall Museum during the Nanjing stop of the exhibition tour, Nanjing, Jiangsu Province, December 2, 2025 (Photo by VCG)

Exhibition

Knights at the Museum

A rare exhibition of European knight armour from Turin touring China offers insight into centuries of China-Italy exchange, shared artistic traditions and Silk Road connections

By Ding Si

Since March 2025, exhibition Steel of Glory: A Knight's Life of Armour, Blade and Honour has been touring museums in China. The collection comes from the Royal Museums of Turin, Italy, some of which is being displayed outside Italy for the first time.

The exhibition is part of celebrations marking the 55th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Italy in 1970. A series of cultural events has been staged in both countries since early 2025, including art exhibitions and film screenings.

Giorgia Corso (Photo by CNS)

For more than 2,000 years, China and Italy have been linked by the Silk Road. As a key point along the ancient route, Gansu Province was chosen as the second stop of the European knight exhibition, which was on display at Gansu Provincial Museum in Lanzhou for four months until November 8. It was also the first time a European museum has staged an exhibition in Gansu.

In an interview with China News Service in Lanzhou, Giorgia Corso, curator of the Royal Armoury at the Musei Reali Torino (Royal Museums of Turin), talked about the exhibition's highlights and discussed the similarities and differences between Chinese and Italian cultural heritage and the exhibition's importance for cultural exchange.

An art historian, Corso works on research projects, restorations and international collaborations. Her academic focus ranges from medieval and modern art history to book illumination and the history of ancient weapons.

China News Service: What was the initial concept and curatorial approach behind the exhibition, and which cities in China will it visit this year?

Giorgia Corso: Knights emerged during the turbulent Middle Ages, evolving from military vassals in feudal territories into a military noble class with its own unique culture and values. They fought on battlefields and competed for glory in tournaments. From classical antiquity to the Middle Ages, from the Renaissance to the modern era, the knight system left a profound imprint on Europe's military, political and cultural spheres. Together with my colleagues, we curated the Steel of Glory: A Knight's Life of Armour, Blade and Honour exhibition to show Chinese audiences the development trajectory and cultural charm of the European knight system and material culture.

The exhibition features 140 stunning pieces of European knight armour, helmets, cuirasses, shields and weapons. It is divided into four sections: "Forging the Self: Knight Armament," "The Road to Glory: The Knight's Career," "The Twilight of the Knight: Challenges in Modern Times" and "A Splendid Farewell: From Warriors to Symbols." The exhibition offers a comprehensive view of the knight system's development across over a thousand years of history. It serves as an important window for audiences to understand the evolution of European society from the Middle Ages to modern times.

The exhibition was held from March 21 to June 22, at Shenzhen Nanshan Museum [in Guangdong Province]. From July 8 to November 8, it [was] in Lanzhou, Gansu. This was the first time a European museum has hosted an exhibition on the ancient Silk Road. [It is currently being held] in Nanjing through April 15, 2026, and will go on to Chengdu, Sichuan Province.

CNS: Both Gansu and Italy were important points along the ancient Silk Road. What exhibits best reflect exchanges between the East and West?

GC: The exhibition features very valuable artefacts, such as a complete set of knight and horse armour, which has left the Royal Armoury for the first time in 200 years to be displayed overseas. We also have a rare set of children's armour and a helmet sculpted into the shape of a fantastical animal, which dates back to the Renaissance period. It's an honour and a pleasure to share our collection with Chinese audiences. Visitors can immerse themselves in the experience of wearing knight armour and holding swords.

One particular exhibit, the armour of a noble Italian knight, features a dragon image, which has a different meaning in Chinese culture. In many European legends, dragons, "imported from China," appear as fantastical, often menacing figures, but not in this case. Here, the craftsmen used the dragon as a symbol of the knight's family and as oriental aesthetic elements to the design.

Also worthy of special attention are the stirrups on display. This invention, which changed the way European cavalry fought, originated from Chinese steel smelting technology and was transmitted to Europe by the nomadic peoples of the steppes. These exhibits clearly show the signs of exchange between East and West.

The exhibition also presents many works on paper: drawings, engravings, printed books and manuscripts. They recount the life and culture of knights through words and images. We must not forget that paper is also a Chinese invention and that the replacement of parchment with paper for the production of printed books was crucial to the development and spread of Western culture.

CNS: What are your impressions of Chinese museums? How do they compare to Western museums?

GC: I arrived in Shenzhen in March [2025], which was my first visit to China, and Gansu was my second stop. I visited Shenzhen Museum, Gansu Provincial Museum and Dunhuang Museum. My most direct impression is that there are many people, especially children. The number of visitors is huge, and they are very relaxed, happy and comfortable. I was deeply impressed. I really like the creative exhibitions and design in Chinese museums.

Many museums also have multimedia tools that allow visitors to interact and participate, which is very popular with the public and is also present, to a lesser extent, in many Italian museums. In Chinese museums, I appreciated the wealth of content, presented in a creative and original way.

When I visited Gansu Provincial Museum and Dunhuang Museum, I found similarities with Italy. These similarities are seen in the intersection of writing, religion and language, which I find fascinating.

For example, the exhibitions at the Dunhuang Grottoes reminded me of the UNESCO World Heritage Site in Italy known as Sacri Monti (Sacred Mountains), built 500 years ago in the Alps in northern Italy. These are groups of chapels built in a natural setting and enriched with paintings and sculptures that tell sacred stories. People could enter them to pray and worship the images. Compared to the Dunhuang Grottoes, beyond the different cultures and dates, I found the same charm in places created for worship in an inaccessible environment. There are similarities in the painting styles, decorative motifs and techniques used to create the objects. The conservation issues and restoration difficulties are also similar.

Some of the decorative motifs in the

Dunhuang murals are strikingly similar to the mosaic designs in St Mark's Basilica in Venice. This is not surprising, as Venice was the city where trade with the East was most frequent and extensive. Many Venetian monuments and works of art are influenced by Asian artistic cultures.

CNS: This year marks the 55th anniversary of diplomatic relations between China and Italy. What significance does this exhibition have for promoting cultural exchange? Can it offer new insights into how Silk Road culture continues today?

GC: As with our exhibition, we're not just showing artefacts. We're telling the stories behind European knight culture, allowing more Chinese audiences to learn about knight culture and Italy. Of course, this is reciprocal. The exhibition also helps us learn more about China and the Silk Road.

Both Venice and Dunhuang have historical similarities in cultural exchange. In the 14th century, Marco Polo from Venice established the link between Italy and China. In 2018, the Pearl of the Silk Road: Dunhuang Grotto Art exhibition was held at the University of Venice, and such exchanges have brought us closer together.

Choosing Gansu as a key stop for this exhibition is especially meaningful. Gansu is a crucial point on the ancient Silk Road, while Italy is the western terminus. When European knight armour is displayed in Gansu, we seem to witness the continuation of dialogues between Eastern and Western civilisations. The artefacts that reflect East-West technological exchanges in the exhibition are the best testament to the spirit of the Silk Road.

I believe that such exhibitions will increase, allowing us to understand each other more and get closer. This exhibition is just the beginning. We also look forward to inviting Chinese art exhibits to Italy, allowing more European audiences to appreciate the charm of Eastern culture.

CNS: What further areas of exchange can Italy and China explore?

GC: I believe that archaeological heritage offers many topics of common interest. For example, we could discuss the importance of the ancient Mediterranean Sea as an area of circulation and exchange between different civilisations. This could be compared with similar geographical realities in China's territory and history. Another topic could be a comparative presentation of artistic techniques that developed uniquely in the East and West, such as ceramics and metalworking. Another theme could be the value of writing and its crucial role in society and art.

Finally, the history of the ruling dynasties, alongside a comparison of life at court and the promotion of the arts, is a topic that may arouse great curiosity. However, these are just a few ideas. A more in-depth reflection based on knowledge of the respective heritages will certainly generate original and stimulating ideas.★

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Top: The Shenzhen stop of the exhibition Steel of Glory: A Knight's Life of Armour, Blade and Honour held in Nanshan Museum, Shenzhen, May 2, 2025 (Photo by VCG)

Above: The Lanzhou stop of the exhibition Steel of Glory: A Knight's Life of Armour, Blade and Honour held in Gansu Provincial Museum, Lanzhou, Gansu Province, July 24, 2025 (Photo by VCG)

Houguan Culture

Grounds for Genius

Tourists visit Houguan City God Temple, Fuzhou, Fujian Province, January 25, 2023 (Photo by IC)

A forum examines how an ancient county's tradition of learning and openness helped shape key figures and ideas in modern China

By Du Guodong

For generations, a small corner of Southeast China has produced thinkers, reformers and innovators far beyond its size. What was it about the region that shaped so much talent, and how can it be replicated?

These questions and more were explored at the Fourth Houguan Forum, which opened in Fuzhou, capital of Southeast China's Fujian Province on December 3. More than 900 participants, including scholars, students, entrepreneurs and descendants of historical figures, gathered to explore the theme "Inheriting and Promoting Houguan Culture to Foster Integrated Development in Education, Technology and Talent."

Houguan is the historical name for what is now the Fuzhou area. Over the centuries, the region earned a reputation for its emphasis on learning, openness to the world and ability to cultivate outstanding talent. Its cultural spirit, rooted in Confucian traditions and maritime connectivity, helped produce generations of people who played pivotal roles in shaping modern China.

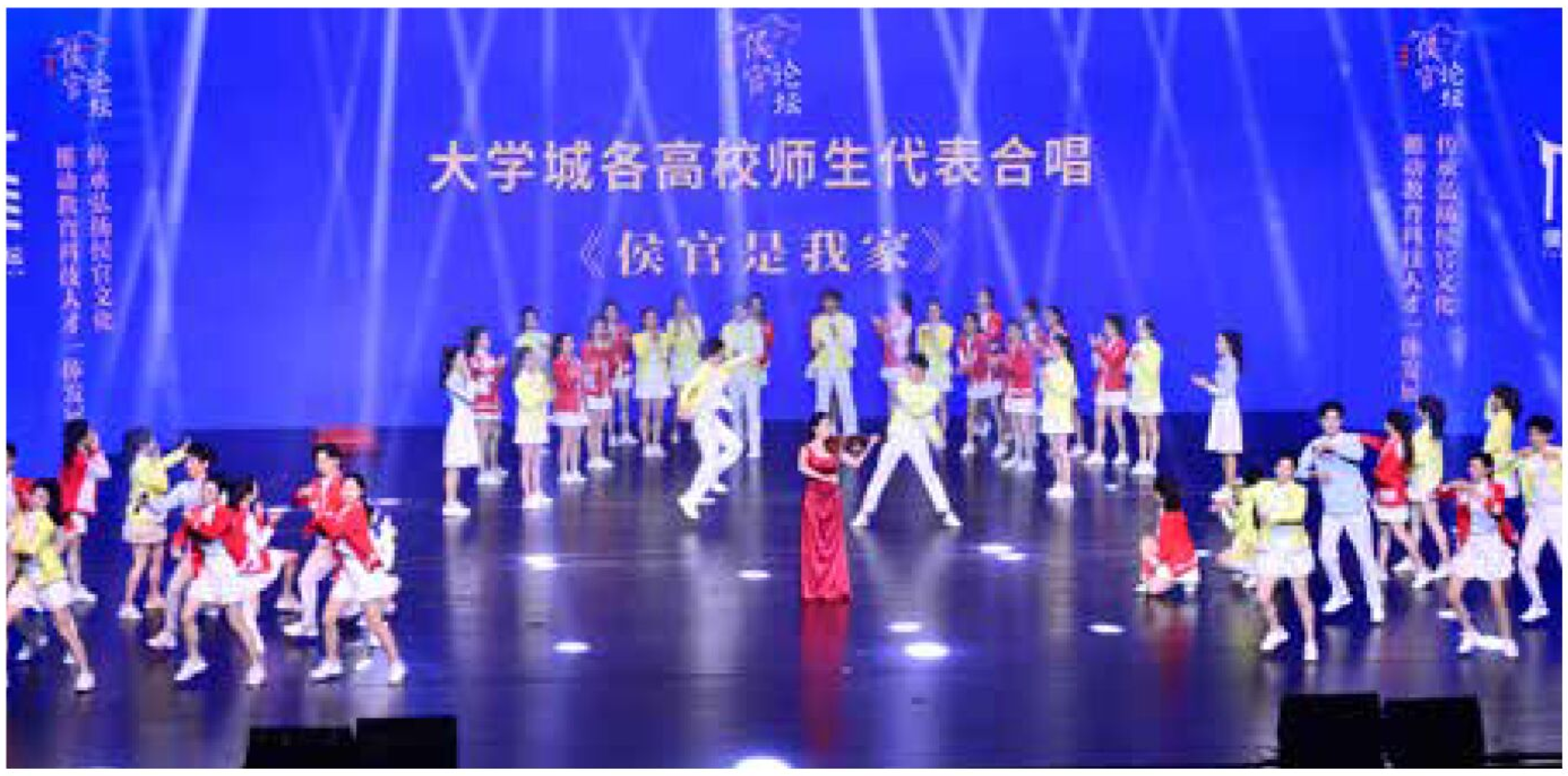
The forum was accompanied by a variety of cultural events, ranging from academic sub-forums and AI art exhibitions to research excursions, book fairs and local opera performances.

Cultural Crossroads

Archaeological discoveries show continuous settlement in Houguan for more than 5,000 years. Surrounded by mountains and close to the sea, the region's warm and humid climate supported early fishing and agriculture. These natural advantages nurtured some of China's earliest Neolithic cultures, including the Tanshishan and Huangtulun cultures, which practised early farming, pottery making and maritime activity.

By the Han Dynasty (206 BCE-220 CE), Houguan had developed into an important administrative and commercial centre. During the Three Kingdoms period (220-280), naval bases were established here, and by the Tang Dynasty (618-907), Fuzhou, the heart of Houguan, had become one of China's three major international ports, alongside Guangzhou in Guangdong Province and Yangzhou in Jiangsu Province. It played a vital role in the Maritime Silk Road, attracting merchants, sailors and cultural influences from across East and Southeast Asia.

This prosperity appears frequently in classical literature. Northern Song (960-1127) poet Long Changqi captured the city's bustling economy with the lines:


大学城各高校师生代表合唱
《侯官是我家》

Top: An overview of Fuzhou Mawei Shipyard Cultural Heritage Site in Fuzhou, Fujian Province, September 3, 2020 (Photo by VCG)

Above: College students perform at the opening ceremony of the 4th Houguan Forum in Fuzhou, Fujian Province, December 3, 2025 (Photo by CNS)

"Hundreds of goods arrive with the tides, wine shops line the streets for miles." Houguan's openness, combined with its local traditions and Confucian heritage, allowed it to develop a distinctive cultural identity, rooted in Chinese traditions yet shaped by the wider world.

Folklore also records early traces of the region's cultural life. A story in *Search for the Spirits*, a collection from the Eastern Jin (317-420), tells of the "Snail Maiden," a mystical woman who helps a poor but virtuous young man named Xie Duan. Xie is described as a "Houguan man," making him the earliest known historical figure associated with the region.

Talent Incubator

A defining feature of Houguan culture is its long-standing emphasis on education. This academic spirit helps explain why the region repeatedly produced major political, intellectual and military figures throughout Chinese history. As early as the fifth century, local governor Ruan Mizhi established more than 20 community schools, a groundbreaking investment in public education in southern China. Chronicles record that he transformed the region from a place where "people did not know learning" to one in which "every household owned books." His efforts laid the foundation for a strong scholarly tradition.

The Song Dynasty (960-1279) marked another high point. As China's political centre shifted southward during this period, Houguan became one of the leading centres for civil service examination candidates. Several sayings from the time reflect the cultural atmosphere: "Half the households in the city are reading books," "Schools fill every street and alley," and "Out of 100,000 families, half have sons serving as officials." Education was not only a path to personal advancement but a shared community value.

By the Ming and Qing dynasties (1368-1911), Houguan had established itself as one of China's most academically accomplished regions. The area built renowned academies such as Aofeng and Quanshan, which trained generations of scholars. Over the centuries, Houguan produced 4,100 successful *jinshi*, the highest level of imperial examination graduates, more than any other prefecture in China.

Geography also shaped the region's outlook. Fujian's mountainous terrain and limited farmland encouraged many residents to seek opportunities abroad, often working as merchants, sailors, interpreters or scholars. Their exposure to foreign cultures fostered a global perspective while reinforcing a strong sense of national identity. This combination of openness and patriotism helped produce some of the most influential reformers of the 19th century.

Lin Zexu is the most widely known. Born in 1785, he is remembered for leading China's confrontation with the British opium trade. He also urged the country to study Western technology and institutions. His writings offered some of the earliest Chinese analyses of Western political systems and influenced later reform movements in China and Japan.

Shen Baozhen, another figure from Houguan, played a central role in modernising China's shipbuilding and naval education. As head of the Fuzhou Shipyard, he promoted technical training, hired foreign specialists and introduced modern engineering practices.

Yan Fu, educated in Fuzhou and later in Britain, brought Darwinian theory, liberalism and modern economic thought into Chinese intellectual debates through his influential translations. These individuals demonstrate how Houguan's culture of learning, openness and national responsibility helped shape China during its difficult transition into the modern era.

Contemporary Innovation

Houguan's cultural influence did not fade with the end of imperial China. Instead, it continued to evolve, adapting to the country's new needs and challenges.

In the late 19th century, Fuzhou Shipyard School pioneered an educational model that combined classroom learning with hands-on industrial training. Students studied theory in the morning and applied it directly in factories and shipyards in the afternoon.

Professor Guo Dan of Fujian Normal University describes this as an early model of school and factory integration. It created a cycle in which education produced talent, talent drove technological progress and technological progress strengthened educational capacity.

This practical approach to learning helped spark what Professor Guo calls a "talent explosion" in Houguan during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The region produced engineers, scientists, naval officers and reformers who played important roles in China's modernisation in fields ranging from industry to diplomacy.

The tradition continues. Houguan remains home to influential scholars, scientists and innovators who reflect the region's cultural values of rigourous study, openness to new ideas and a commitment to applying knowledge for national development. The Fourth Houguan Forum highlighted this vitality through academic discussions, cultural exhibitions, and research activities that connect tradition with innovation.

At the forum, Lin Qiang, a sixth-generation descendant of Lin Zexu and former vice chairman of the Fujian Provincial People's Congress, emphasized that Houguan culture is not simply a historical legacy but a living force. He noted that China's current focus on integrating education, science and talent aligns closely with the values and practices of Houguan's historical figures. This continuity between past and present helps explain why the region still plays an important role in China's development.

According to Xu Jun, vice president of the Shanghai Medical College of Fudan University, many enlightened figures from Houguan have championed science and technology as a means to strengthen and enrich the nation. Through this process, the defining traits of Houguan culture took shape: respect for science, rigourous scholarship, openness and inclusiveness and a spirit of innovation.

Houguan's legacy spans two millennia, from prehistoric cultures and ancient maritime trade to modern political reform and scientific advancement. Its story reflects China's own capacity to learn, adapt and reinvent itself. Rooted in Confucian learning, energised by global engagement and revitalised through modern science and technology, Houguan culture remains a powerful force shaping new generations.

Yan Yixin, former vice president of Hohai University in Nanjing, Jiangsu Province, observed that as China moves deeper into an era defined by knowledge and innovation, Houguan's blend of tradition, openness and intellectual courage may prove more relevant than ever.

"What Houguan culture has left is not only a brilliant historical memory," he said, "but also a spiritual code etched into our very bloodline."★

NEWS CHINA
THE CONTEXT

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A night view of Guangzhou Grand Theatre and its surroundings, Guangzhou, Guangdong Province, October 29, 2021 (Photo by VCG)

Greater Bay Area

Centre Stage

Increased connectivity and cultural associations make South China's Greater Bay Area a convenient neighbourhood for theatre, the arts, music and more

By Michael Jones

The Greater Bay Area (GBA) encompasses eleven interlinked cities stretching around the Pearl River Delta. These major cities are Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Hong Kong, Macao, Zhuhai, Foshan, Huizhou, Dongguan, Zhongshan, Jiangmen and Zhaoqing. Together they form one of the most densely populated and economically dynamic metro-regions on the planet. It is a place where container ports, financial districts and technology parks sit alongside dim sum restaurants, mahjong playing veterans and old river temples. The GBA weaves together Chinese ambition and coastal cosmopolitanism into a single, restless city-cluster. Moreover, as a dynamic and diverse metropolis, the GBA is bursting with creativity. This creative mindset ensures that the GBA is rapidly becoming one of the world's leading centres for the arts and cultural tourism. Each of the cities within the GBA features their own bustling cultural scene, however none of these scenes lives in isolation. Instead, thanks to the incredible interconnectivity of the region, these artistic communities thrive in an interlocked web of passionate creation.

Cultural Neighbourhood

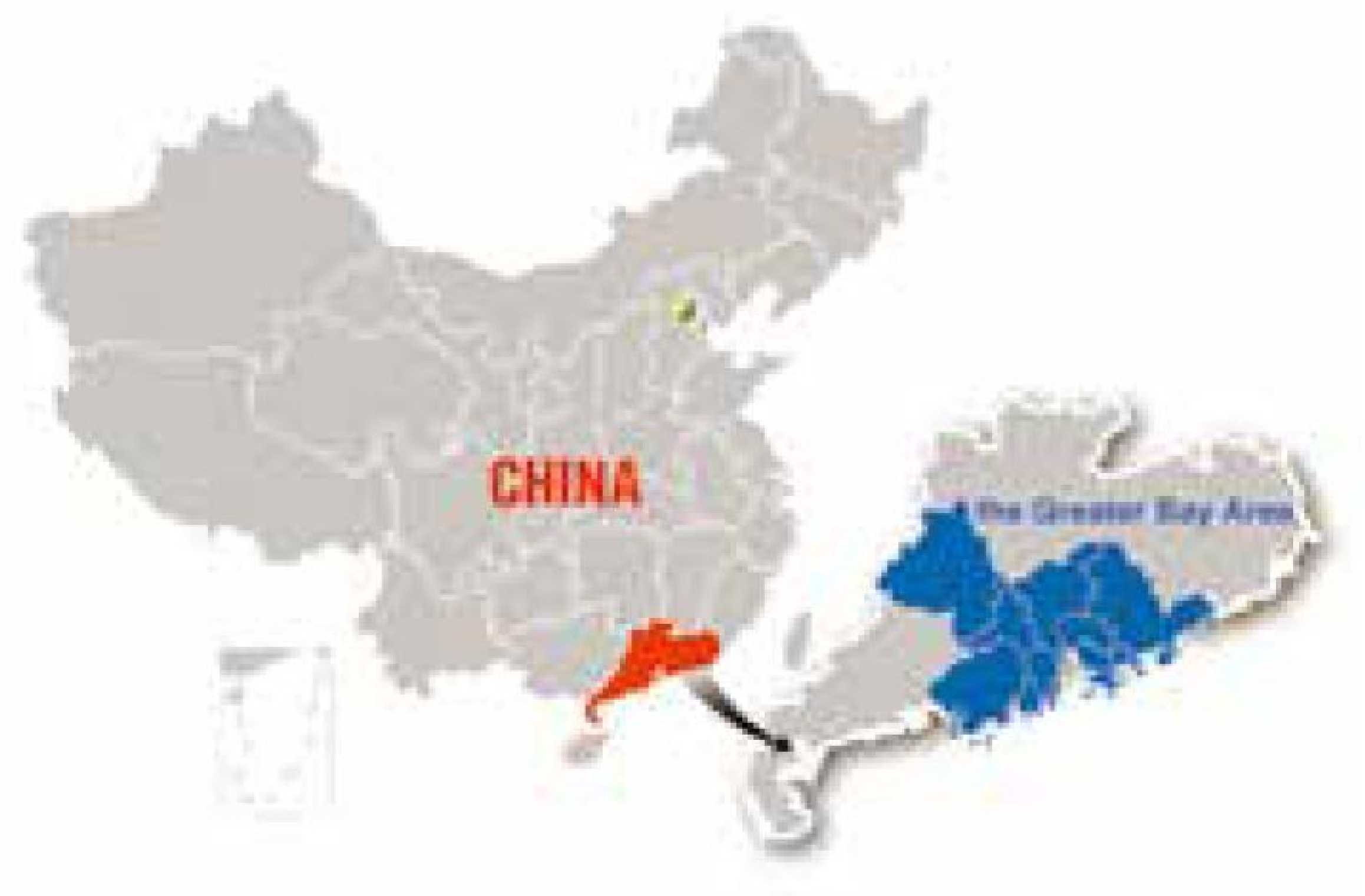
For me, the real magic of the GBA lies in how casually one can treat this enormous area as a single cultural neighbourhood. One recent Saturday in November 2025, I spent my afternoon wandering through a Banksy exhibition in Shenzhen's Sea World Art and Culture Centre, moving from stenciled protest pieces to satirical photographs and videos of tongue-in-cheek street performances. Less than 24 hours later, I was in a plush seat at Dongguan Yulan Theatre, watching Broadway's beloved production of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* on its Asian debut. The speed with which I was able to move from gritty British street art to a lavish American musical, simply by hopping across city borders, feels entirely normal here, which is in itself an extraordinary privilege.

The months leading up to and following that weekend I have been fortunate enough to trace a cultural constellation across the region. In September, I again found myself in Shenzhen's Sea World Art and Culture Centre. On that occasion I stepped into the vivid inner world of artist Frida Kahlo. Her self-portraits, Mexican folk motifs and unapologetic vulnerability were displayed with a sensitivity that made me forget, at times, that I was in a high-tech Chinese megacity, rather than a Mexican village. A short train ride away, I slipped into a very different atmosphere at the Guangzhou Opera House, designed by British architectural icon Dame Zaha Hadid. Together with friends from across the GBA, I immersed myself in the world of *Murder on the Orient Express,* where Agatha Christie's careful plotting and Poirot's meticulous logic unfolded beneath the curves and shadows of one of China's most iconic modern theatres.

The region's musical and theatrical life is equally classical and postmodern in flavour. Also in September, I crossed the water to visit beautiful Hong Kong and hear An Evening of the Italian Masters: Vivaldi, Rossini, Donizetti & Puccini at Tsuen Wan Town Hall. As the strings and arias soared, I was acutely aware that only a few hours earlier I had been on the Chinese mainland, surrounded by the everyday bustle of Guangdong streets. In early summer, I was in Shenzhen Poly Theatre watching British soprano Sarah Brightman in *Sunset Boulevard,* a West End classic written by Brightman's former husband, Lord Andrew Lloyd-Webber. This musical masterpiece playing amidst the modernity of the GBA reminded me how readily the region welcomes and reinterprets global cultural icons. This is exactly the same welcoming spirit that has allowed the region to host, among many other recent events, British and French film festivals, a German opera season, and festivities for Mexico's annual Day of the Dead. Celebrations of global culture, which might historically have been limited to parties in embassies, are now visible and vibrant in cinemas, museums, and theatres across the region.

Indeed, many of the international artistic exhibitions, performances and experiences that tour the GBA, find a new and unique interpretation within region. In April I took my seat in Foshan Grand Theatre for *Life of Pi*, a production that feels particularly at home in a region so intimately connected to the sea, to migration and to layered identities. Watching the story of a boy, a tiger and the vastness of the ocean unfold in a modern theatre in a historic Lingnan city, I was struck by how naturally the Greater Bay Area embraces narratives of movement, resilience and reinvention. These narratives mirror the region's own evolution from river delta to a global powerhouse.

The world's largest aquatic performance *The House of Dancing Water* at City of Dreams Macao, China, May 17, 2019 (Photo by VCG)



Creative Ecosystem

However, if there is a single performance that symbolises the GBA's blend of ambition and spectacle, it is surely *The House of Dancing Water* in Macao's City of Dreams. After a hiatus spent renovating their phenomenal theatre and refining their classic show, the production has now returned. I saw *The House of Dancing Water* many times pre-pandemic, and the prospect of watching it again, in its refreshed form, feels like revisiting an old friend who has been given a fabulous makeover in my absence. The sheer technical audacity of the production, with its plunging stage and gravity-defying choreography, sits perfectly within a region that treats innovation as a way of life.

What makes all of this possible is the dense mesh of connectivity that binds the Greater Bay Area together. High-speed trains, metro lines, intercity buses and ferries turn what could be daunting distances into simple weekend choices. I do not have to commit to a weeklong city break to enjoy a world-class gallery or theatre. Instead, I can decide on a Saturday morning whether I fancy Frida Kahlo in Shenzhen, Italian opera in Hong Kong, or a murder mystery in Guangzhou. In many countries, such a range of options spread across an entire region would feel cumbersome and unmanageable, yet in this magnificent corner of southern China, it feels as convenient as crossing town.

Crucially, these cities are not competing islands of culture. They are collaborative nodes in a shared creative ecosystem. The touring companies, orchestras and exhibitions that criss-cross the GBA do more than sell tickets, they help weave a common cultural language across the diverse local, international and historical communities that create this region. Audiences follow shows from city to city, while artists and organisers form networks that stretch from Foshan's grand theatres to Dongguan's modern stages, from waterfront cultural districts in Shenzhen to the shimmering skyline of Hong Kong. The result is a region where diversity is not just tolerated but actively curated.

As the GBA continues to develop, its cultural offer feels less like an added extra and more like a defining feature. This is a place where you can watch a British musical led by an international star one weekend, immerse yourself in the life of a Mexican painter the next, and still find time for Italian opera, experimental street art and a gravity-defying water show. The sheer variety and international quality of the arts here does more than entertain. It shapes how residents and visitors understand the region, not simply as an economic engine, but as a vibrant, interconnected home for stories, music and imagination.★

Practicalities

All cities within the GBA are linked to domestic and international flights, and high-speed rail, including Hong Kong, which has high-speed links to other Chinese cities. Within the region, long-distance subway systems, high-speed rail and cross-border ferries link the major cities.

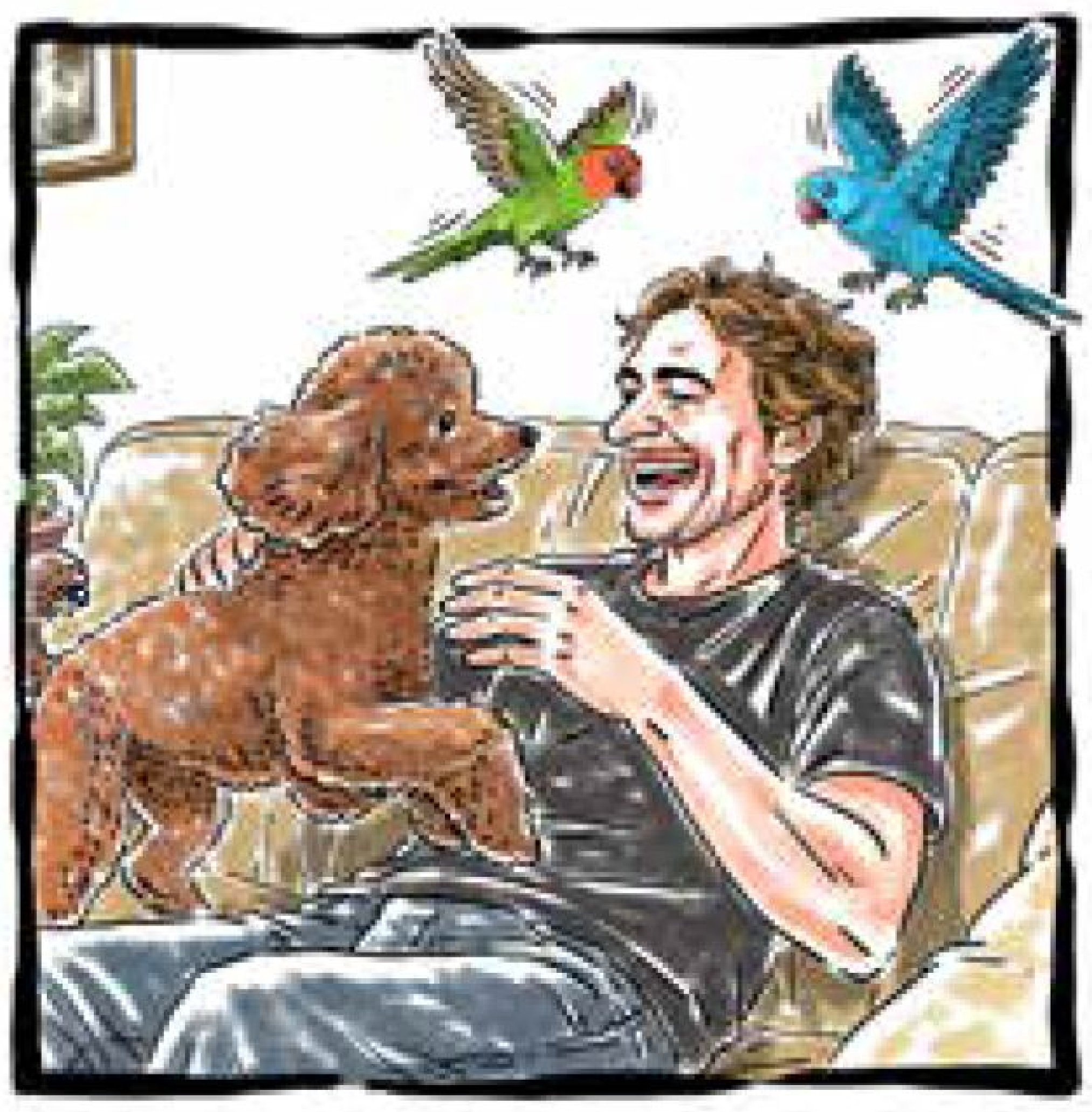
Pooches to Parrots

By Sam Duckett

These days, everyone knows about China's booming pet economy, but I couldn't believe just how far the rabbit hole goes. According to Goldman Sachs' 2024 report, there are now more pets in urban Chinese cities than children aged 4 and under, and by 2030, it's projected that pets could nearly double the number of young kids. As a self-proclaimed founding member of China's pet economy, I couldn't be happier with how far the industry has bunny-hopped ahead.

After a decade of being a pet owner in China, I understand perfectly why the industry's soaring high – cities are bursting with communities that make it incredibly easy to find your perfect furry match. My pet story dates back to the autumn of 2015, when a friend asked if we could look after her adorable grey poodle, Duoduo, during the Mid-Autumn Festival.

During that weeklong dog-sitting adventure, I made friends with dog-walking neighbours, pampered Duoduo at the pet salon, and spent lots of time together during chilly evenings. On the final day, while waiting at the pet salon, a playful dark furry pup rolled up next to me and started tugging at my shoelaces. This energetic baby poodle and I started playing together and it felt like we'd known each other forever. Impulsively, I turned to the salon owner and asked if I could take him home. I wanted to howl when I heard the price, but that wasn't going to stop me. Just like that, "Juice" became the newest member of our clan.



In the years that followed, I forged friendships with fellow dog owners, trading recommendations for beauty salons and pet food brands. Our weekends revolved around dog-friendly hotspots like parks and pet-friendly restaurants. My RedNote feed was filled with amusing pet content that never failed to crack me up – there's nothing funnier than a dog throwing a tantrum. He was present for our wedding photos and when we brought our daughter home from the hospital, and with the introduction of remote work, we spent even more time together, becoming as thick as thieves.

Just over two years after bringing Juice home, he and Duoduo successfully mated and welcomed five adorable pups into the world. I say that like it was planned, but it actually happened while I was putting the kettle on. The local pet hospital was fantastic during the birthing process, and thanks to our active community WeChat groups, it was a breeze finding loving families for each of the five pups. I was amazed at how supportive all the local pet owners were in helping our furry family find friends.

Taking a page out of Juice's book, we decided we also wanted to expand our family further and welcomed six vibrant fish into our home after a delightful Saturday afternoon near Shilihe subway station, known for its fantastic plant and pet markets. Glancing at the fish bowl now feels as natural to me as the TV or the toys scattered across the floor on weekends.

The family was getting bigger, but we felt there was still a bit more room in "Sam's arc." Enter Millie and Mew, two feisty parrots – one cinnamon green and one lightning blue. Millie is a bit more boisterous and energetic, while Mew is much calmer and loves a good sleep. Together, they offer a perfect mix of yin and yang to our household. So far, they haven't squabbled with any of our other pets. I remain the only casualty, with my bite-riddled fingers looking as worn out as Harry Potter's wand.

So far, they haven't squabbled with any of our other pets. I remain the only casualty, with my bite-riddled fingers looking as worn out as Harry Potter's wand

As joyful as the past decade has been, it comes with the bittersweet reminder that nothing lasts forever. On July 15, 2025, Juice passed away. My sweet boy had contended a weak heart since birth, and as he approached 10, fainting spells became all too common. His final days were cuddled up with me on couch, surrounded by family, as he drifted away in his sleep.

Juice's absence left an aching void, a loss we're still learning to navigate. Yet, we've realised that the last ten years immersed in China's vibrant pet culture have brought us some of the greatest joys of our lives. As Chinese New Year and Christmas approach, my 5-year-old daughter and I have made a promise: we'll welcome a new furry member into our family soon. Because even in loss, love always finds a way to grow.★

I'm Not Judging, But

By Suzanne Robare

Back in the late 90s and early 2000s, I did quite a bit of freelance work judging different competitions, all age groups, on everything from talent contests to English. Most contests involved stashing the judges away for a few days in some rural hotel or convention centre and bringing them out only for the actual contest: This was supposed to eliminate the possibility of a contestant (or far more likely, the contestant's parents) from "influencing" the judges with anything from a cash-stuffed envelop to a jug of moonshine. I've never been offered anything myself, and I'm starting to feel a bit insulted, but I have seen the better-known judges decline gifts of fruit baskets and bottles of Glenfiddich. I can quite honestly say I've never known a judge to accept a gift, but funny stuff no doubt occurs here and there: I can recall one contest where I was told before the contest began that the girl in the white dress was going to win. However, there were two contestants with white dresses and the judges nervously gave both girls identical sets of scores, fearful of offending the Powers That Be. (For the record, both girls were equally awful.)

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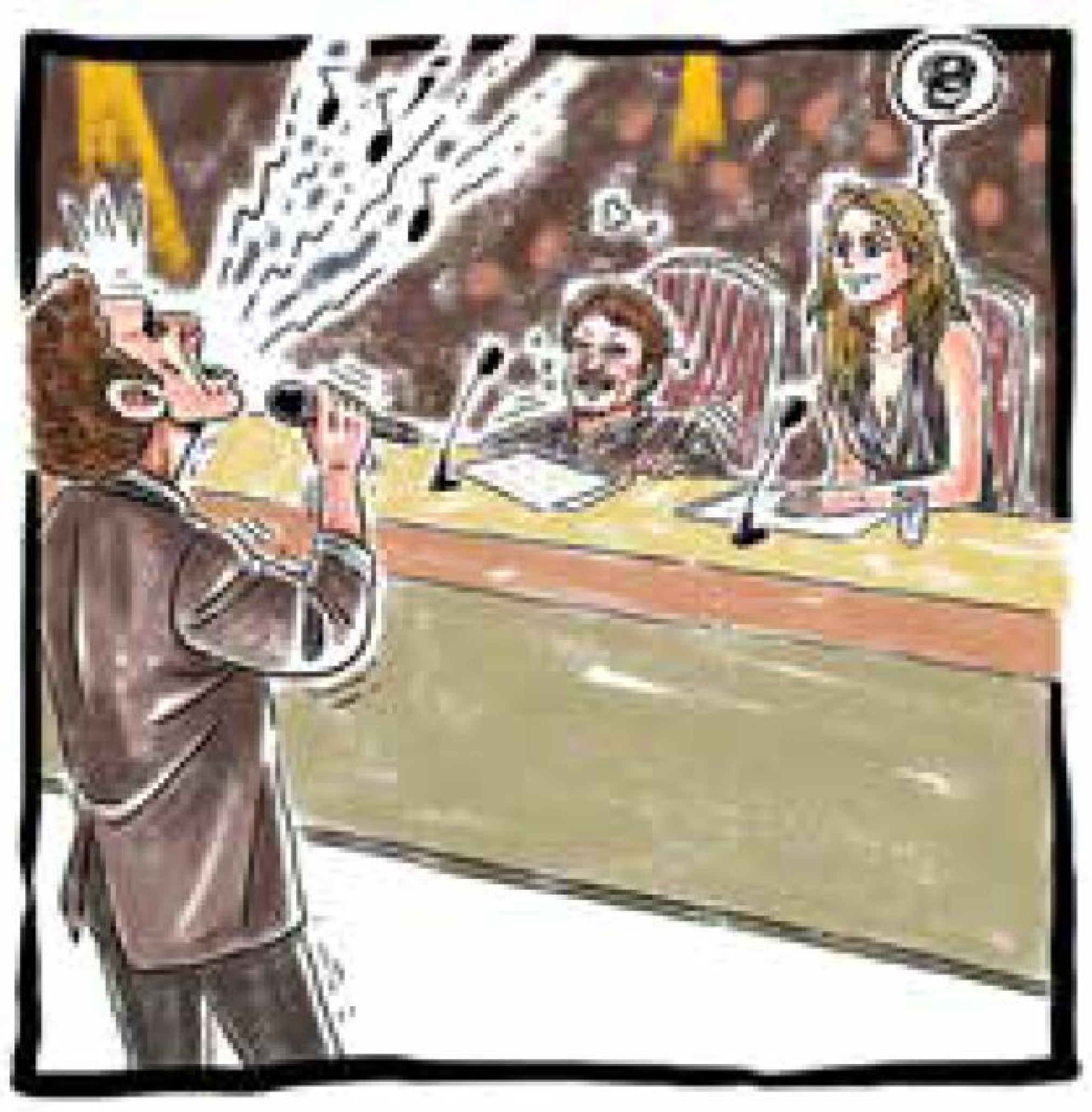
The only allowable contact with contestants usually follows the award ceremony, when you pose for pictures. For the most part, I stay in my room, or hang out with fellow judges in their rooms. emerging only to file silently down the hallway to whatever TV studio or stage was in use. I have mastered the fine art of striding down a hallway without tripping or making eye contact, looking pleasant, but not smug, and not at all approachable.

Oh, the talent contests! Some talent contests involved using English, some were straight up talent, often involving singing, playing the guitar or tap dancing. On one memorable occasion, nine different contestants in a single afternoon brought out guitars and accompanied themselves singing Adele's anthem "Rolling in the Deep." One player who had just taught herself guitar the day before had to stop frequently to check her fingering on the chords. Song finished, she demanded to know on the spot if she had won. Since the scores had yet to be tabulated and 20 other contestants were still waiting to perform, it was a struggle to remain pleasant and neutral. That's the job, really: to remain pleasant and neutral, no matter what.

I have sat on stage, camera trained to my face, smiling encouragingly at magic tricks gone wrong, girl groups singing what sounded like "X boys!" which gave rise to conjecture, and well-coiffed boy bands nervously performing Westlife tunes. I recall a tenor throwing his head back at the chorus and bursting into a high-pitched howl in the name of harmony. My fellow judges slid under the table, helpless with laughter, but by dint of clenching my jaws together I remained upright, a frozen smile on my face, through the remaining one minute and 30 seconds of pure torture. I clutched my jaws together so firmly that I cracked a tooth, but by God, this group of teenage boys were not humiliated by the entire panel of judges disappearing under the table, shaking from laughter.



Oh, the English speech contests! Word of advice: It helps to read the prompt, and for goodness' sake, don't turn every response into a tired chestnut about Madame Curie, Thomas Edison, Isaac Newton or Helen Keller, no matter how well rehearsed. One adorable little Chinese boy, squeaky clean, shirt pressed, seersucker bowtie perfectly tied, hair parted down the centre and plastered down to his skull, regaled the audience with stories of his life growing up as a woman of colour in a hood, replete with gang signals. Most recently, a contestant caught me after the event and asked, "Michael Jackson. Black man. Ok?" I wasn't sure what he meant, but the limited grammatical range and accuracy in that utterance completely justified the score I had given him. A bit confused, I asked in Chinese, "I didn't hear you, it's so noisy here, can you say it again?" He leaned into my ear and shouted, "Michael Jackson! Black man! OK?" I suddenly understood: Was I a racist white old lady, or was I hip enough to appreciate the genius that was Michael Jackson? I gave him a thumbs-up and he sauntered off secure in the knowledge that while a harsh judge, at least I wasn't racist.★

A Mug's Game: China's North-South Tea Showdown Reveals a Steep Divide

By Mina Yan

I love stand-up comedy, and recently I heard a joke that literally made me laugh out loud. The comedian said he had tea with a southern friend, and, being a northerner, he almost peed himself. Why? Because his friend kept pouring tea, and he kept drinking it like it was his job. Later, he asked his friend why he kept pushing tea on him, and the friend replied with equal confusion: "Why did you keep drinking it? I'm a southerner. If you drink, I need to pour." To which he answered, "I'm a northerner. If you pour, I need to drink. It's how we were raised."

What makes it even funnier, especially as I sip my basic English breakfast, is that he's dead accurate. If you think ordering tea in China gets you one universal beverage, or even tea ware that looks remotely similar, you're in for a steep surprise.

Imagine wandering into a cosy Beijing hutong, asking for tea and getting a sturdy glass jar the size of your face, steam rising like a locomotive. Now picture yourself in a humid Guangzhou alleyway, asking for the same thing and suddenly you're handed a thimble-sized cup after a six-part ritual involving tiny pots, myriad accessories and a dedicated tea table. Congratulations, you've just crossed the great tea parallel, also known as the Yangtze River.

Let's break down why there's such a cultural gap when it comes to tea in China. In the north, tea is less an art form and more a survival tool. It's a warm hug in a mug: big, friendly and brutally efficient. Tea comes in thermoses that could double as construction equipment, meant to be sipped while braving a dry winter wind that feels like sandpaper on your face. Northerners adore floral teas like jasmine, not because they're delicate, but because their fragrance can punch through a long day in the cold. It's hearty, and the only ritual you need to know is: if someone pours you tea, you drink it. Otherwise, it's disrespectful.

Now, take one step south of the Yangtze and prepare for tea whiplash. In the humid, tea-covered south, drinking tea isn't something you do while multitasking. Tea is the main event. This is the home of *gongfu cha*, where you sit before a miniature tea set that looks like it belongs in a kid's dollhouse, and just when you think you're about to get a drink, your host begins a series of graceful, practised movements of warming the pot, rinsing cups, pouring water over adorable figurines, inhaling the leaves, pouring with the elegance of a crane, and finally presenting you with a cup the size of a bottle cap. One sip later, they pour another. It's less about grabbing a drink and more about participating in an endless loop of hospitality, admiring tasting notes like a sommelier with a prized bottle.

The differences are delightfully absurd. In the north, if your mug isn't full to the brim, your host has failed you. In the south, if your cup stays empty for more than three seconds, your host has failed you.

And yet, despite these differences, both traditions share one sacred principle: Tea is the ultimate social glue. It's the mandatory pause in the day, the excuse to sit down, chat and connect. Whether you're carrying a full Stanley that could double as a self-defence weapon or delicately sipping from a cup that looks like a toy, you're part of the same tradition. Just remember the universal rule: when offered tea, always say yes, even if you have no idea how much to sip.★

REALCHINESE

liù biān xíng zhàn shì

六边形战士

liubianxing zhanshi

all-rounder

As AI enters more and more fields, young people are facing even tougher competition in the job market. Many parents now hope to train their children into *liubianxing zhanshi,* meaning an "all-rounder."

The term combines *liubianxing* ("hexagon") and *zhanshi* ("warrior"). It originated from *Tokyo Table Tennis News,* a Japanese media outlet that once used a hexagonal radar chart to evaluate an athlete's abilities in six categories: strength, speed, tactics, attack, defence and experience. An athlete who excels in all six forms a perfect hexagon on the chart.

The phrase spread to China after Japanese media had praised world-renowned Chinese table tennis star Ma Long as a *liubianxing zhanshi*, following his gold-medal wins in both the men's singles and team events at the 2016 Rio Olympics. The reports said Ma had achieved full marks across all six metrics.

As the term gained popularity online, its meaning expanded beyond sports. It now describes anyone with well-rounded abilities: Not just professional expertise, but also social skills, communication, leadership, stress management and more. For example, a *liubianxing zhanshi* on campus is not only academically strong but also active in sports, arts and extracurricular activities, all while managing time effectively to keep a busy life organised and balanced.★

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